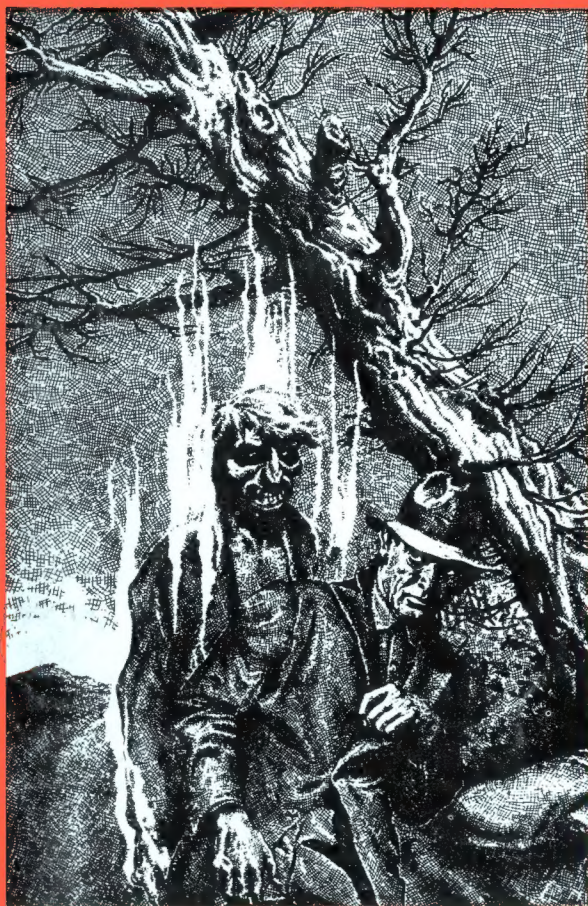


MAGAZINE OF
HORROR

BIZARRE ● FRIGHTENING ● GRUESOME



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WITCH**

by NICTZIN
DYALHIS

**THE LAST OF
PLACIDE'S
WIFE**

by KIRK
MASHBURN

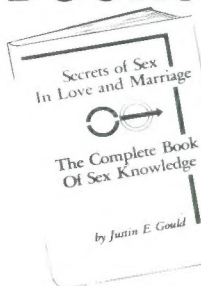
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The Bizarre and The Unusual

Volume 4

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Robert A. W. Lowndes, Editor

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The Editor's Page

A large enough percentage of the active readers interested in trying their hand at writing weird or horror fiction, added to the percentage which is interested in reading stories by new authors, makes it worth my while to discuss the problems of writing weird fiction here.

With a very few exceptions (the occasional genius-type young person who seems to know almost by instinct that which other talented persons can learn only through experience and study) the beginning young writer is an imitator. This is no slur; he or she cannot be anything else. Good fiction comes out of life experience which includes vicarious experience in reading great literature and good contemporary fiction of all varieties. The beginner, at whatever age, is often tempted to try to translate his own life experiences *directly* into fiction; this works so seldom that it's better to say it doesn't work at all—because in the few instances where it has worked, the writer in question has nonetheless done what has to be done in writing fiction: transformed and metamorphosed his material so that what emerges is art, rather than journalism.

Most beginners do not have enough consciously remembered first-hand life experience (particularly in the weird field) to build upon. They are dependant upon their subconscious, dreams, imagination, and their fund of reading for models, and either consciously or unconsciously imitate those ancestors for whom they have the most affinity at the moment.

In writing, one can choose one's parents, godparents, etc. quite deliberately. But one very important thing is the ability to distinguish between good and bad models—not good and bad ideas, good and bad themes, but "stylistic" models. To do that, one has to have, at the very least, some idea of what constitutes the differences between good writing and bad writing; and this, as Andy Offutt points out in highly amusing length in an article in the June 1967 issue of the *S.F.W.A. Bulletin*, is exactly what a distressingly large percentage not only of new writers but of currently published writers are incapable of doing.

They simply do not know the difference between good writing and bad writing, between the *creative and imaginative* use of language, and the *unthinking* perpetration of conventional phrases—cliches. They haven't taken the trouble to *look*, for example, either to see for themselves whether every dawn is really a "gray dawn" or whether really first class writers have applied other adjectives or type of descriptions, metaphors, etc., to that word "dawn". If you want to give a feeling of oppression, etc., at the start of the new day, is "gray dawn" the *only* way this can be achieved? Yet, in story after story, the writer has mechanically typed these two words out and expected that this would do the job for him.

We are, of course, circumscribed by such writing; we see very little else in the normal, everyday course of reading or listening; and a large percentage of it is deliberate. It has been produced and presented this way intentionally to create signal re-

The Red Witch

by Nictzin Dyalhis

One of the most popular stories ever to run in *WEIRD TALES* was featured in the April 1925 issue, introducing a new author, Nictzin Dyalhis. Readers were sure that this must be a fancy pen-name for someone else; but as it transpired it was nothing of the kind: "Dyalhis" is a long-standing English name, though its derivations may be something else. *When the Green Star Waned* brought forth cries for more from this new author; and while he was never prolific, seven more stories appeared between that debut and his last bow in WT with *Heart of Atlantian*, in the September 1940 issue. Two of his tales, have appeared in Pyramid's anthologies from WT: *Weird Tales*—R-1029, 50c (*The Sea Witch*) and *Worlds of Weird*—R-1125, 50c (*The Sapphire Goddess*).

IS THERE A past, present, and a future; or are they in reality all the same state, being merely differing phases of the same eternal "Now"?

Are our lives and deaths and the interludes between them naught

but illusion; and are we ever the same beings, yet capable, even though we do not recognize the fact, of experiencing two or more states of consciousness of personal identity—I mean, under certain exceptional conditions?

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WEIRD TALES, April; no record of separate renewal.

Times there are when my recent terrific experience impels me to adopt that hypothesis. How else may I explain the events wherein I played so strange a part—together with another who is far dearer to me than aught else in the universe?

Am I Randall Crone, a scientist connected with a great public museum, or am I Ran Kron, a youthful warrior of a savage tribe in the eon-old Ice Age? Is my wife, Rhoday Day—the modern product of this Twentieth Century; or is she Red Dawn, the flaming-haired daughter of a red-headed witch-priestess of a devil-worshipping tribe of skin-clad Anthropophagi in that same remote Ice Age?

What is true, and what false? By what strange laws are we governed, we mortals, that we can see neither ahead nor backward, and are only aware of a limited "Here"?

My brain reels as I seek to solve the mystery—and to what account? Truly has a great poet said:

Of all my seeking, this is all
my gain—

No agony of any mortal brain
Shall wrest the secret of the life
of man,

The search has taught me that
the search is vain!

I FIRST SAW her in the
museum where I was on duty, and

hard-headed scientist that I prided myself on being, I admit that my heart did a flip-flop, and I knew I beheld the one woman for whom I'd ever truly care. But that is a mild word for the love I felt. Love, I say; and I mean just that. For soul has spoken to soul, and we twain know that we belong to each other.

As I have said: I loved Rhoda Day from the first; and later I learned from her own lips that her feelings toward me were identical. Yet when I asked her to be my wife she burst into tears, sobbing, "Oh, Randall, if only I could say 'Yes'; but—but—I—dare not!"

"Don't you care for me?"

"More than for life itself . . ."

"Then why not—surely there must be some reason?"

"Oh, Randall, a terrible one . . ."

"Tell me," I urged. But I coaxed for over an hour, holding her close in my arms, her head with its coronal of red-gold hair resting on my shoulder, her soft cheek against mine, before she finally gasped out her fears in broken phrases.

I'll not attempt to render her exact words. It simply can not be done. We both were in the grip of one of life's greatest emotions, or to be precise, a whole storm of emotions; and at such times I do not think that memory reproduces exactly. But in substance, thus the matter stood:

From a child, she'd been cognizant that, no matter where she was, or what she did, always there seemed to be another present, invisible, but very real nevertheless. A very terrible presence, too, inspiring her with loathing and dread, although it did not seem antagonistic to her welfare or her life. Rather it seemed to gloat over her with an air of proprietorship which she found indescribably horrifying.

Times there were when the presence exercised a very real power to protect her, as for example—when in her eleventh year she had a nerve-shaking experience with an ill-natured brute of a dog that snarled and menaced her with bared fangs. She knew, irrefutably, that the beast would have sprung in another moment, and stood paralyzed with terror, unable to cry out for help.

She sensed a storm of ferocious wrath sweep past her, enveloping the dog; and—unbelievable as it appears—that dog died! Yet on it body was evident no mark of violence. Apparently the brute died in a paroxysm of terror. But even after that episode, for a long while she had no idea as to what the Presence was.

As she grew older, she noted more frequently that that same power, or force, or influence, was exerting itself in her behalf to guard her—sometimes too zeal-

ously—a something too fiercely possessive and capable of emitting a wave of such malignant hostility that she was for the most part devoid of the friends such as a young girl usually has.

And as she ripened into the first flush of young womanhood, drawn by her beauty there was no lack of young men who sought to do her homage and court her with their attentions—but none of them ever sought long. Doubtless, the air of hostility they felt about her, enshrouding her like a garment, they attributed to her; believing her to be of a disagreeable, if not an actually repellent personality; instead of realizing that it was an alien nature, emanating from a source outside herself, and certainly quite apart from her desires.

At that same period she became aware that the Presence was even more strongly possessive in its attitude; and worse, again and again it made her sense its proximity even in the sanctum of her own room. But up until the day we were assured of each other's feelings she had not seen the thing—whatever it was. That night, however, after retiring, she awoke with the hideous feeling of being not alone—awoke to see the two eyes staring down at her; eyes aflame with wrath; eyes set in a vague, nebulous blur that might or might not have borne the semblance of a human face.

OF COURSE SHE was frightened. Any one would be, under the same circumstances. She was so frightened that, try as she would to call out and arouse the household she could emit no sound louder than a moan, barely audible to herself. She could not even move a muscle; could only lie still in an agony of apprehension, staring wildly up into the blazing orbs not a yard above her face.

Oddly enough, the apparition contented itself with glaring at her, striving to impress something on her, striving to impress something on her mind, indelibly. All the impression conveyed, however, was that in some manner she had angered the "Thing", although how, or why, she could not comprehend.

But as we met more frequently, and our minds as well as our hearts became more filled with each other, the unholy visitant, appearing nightly, became more and more enraged. It was easier to see, assuming density of form and features with its rapidly growing wrath. After such visits she felt as if she had been beaten, physically; with a thick stick, wielded by a strong hand and arm.

Always it strove to impress upon her consciousness a very definite command, but always it failed to make its will register. Yet with each visit it became more

visible until it was easily seen to be a huge man, lone-armed and thick-legged, inclining more to the blond type than to the swarthy; skin-clad, carrying a huge knotted club, and a great stone-bladed knife stuck through a narrow leather thong tied about his middle.

"He—he—looks so—*savage*," she shuddered.

I stared down at the lovely, tear-bedewed face, my mind in a queer jumble of commingled amazement and fear. Those wondrous blue eyes looked straight back into mine, reading my unspoken thought.

"Randall, my beloved," she said gravely, mastering her emotions with a superb manifestation of will-power, "it all sounds crazy enough, I know; but please do not think your Rhoda is crazy. *She isn't!* I know what I've been subjected to ever since I was old enough to remember anything."

Ashamed of my momentary suspicion, I hastened to make the only amends within my power.

"If you're crazy, then I'll go crazy, too," I stated seriously. "How soon will you marry me? You love me, and I love you. That being the case, to whom but me should you turn for sympathy, understanding, and protection; insofar as lies within my power to give them . . . why, Rhoda, what's a husband *good* for, if not

to stand between his woman and the whole world, and the Powers of Hell, too, for that matter, if she needs his aid? Once married, we can be together at the very times when your danger is the greatest. I don't know what I can do, if anything; but I'll guarantee that whatever this skin'clad giant is up to, he'll have me to dispose of before he harms you. I want you, and you need me, and that brings us back where we were—*How soon do we get married?*"

"Randall! Randall! Stop urging me, or you'll sweep me off my feet! I can not and will not let you become involved . . ."

"Try keeping me out," I replied. Suddenly over me swept an unalterable certitude—that I was already involved, fully as much as was she. Nay, more: I felt that I always had been; only until then I had not known it. But in that one moment I knew that my fate and Rhoda's were one and the same; and that whatever this being was which menaced, it was likewise a menace to me, and would be so forevermore, unless in some manner as yet unguessed by me I could put an end to its unholy machinations. So I told her of my sudden conviction, and when I'd concluded, I saw stark worship replace the fear-haunted expression in her eyes.

"Randall"—her voice was vibrant with all the love a woman

feels in her soul and can not express with mere words—"you'd dare that awful being, risk your life, perhaps your very soul for—me?"

"Risk my life, perhaps my soul, for you, Rhoda? Mine would be but a pitifully weak love if I hesitated to do so. I most certainly am going to do that very thing, if need be. Your troubles henceforth are my troubles too, so that's that! Now let's drop all this cross-purpose talk and talk sense for a while. I've already asked you to marry me, and now I'm saying it differently—we two are going to get married right now, at once immediately, today! Get me? You've got absolutely nothing to say about it. *I'm* Boss, with a big 'B'! And how do you like *that*?"

"Oh, I—I—give up," she faltered. "Only you will simply have to wait at least a week. We've simply got to conform somewhat to the standard conventions and tell a few people; otherwise tongues are sure to wag, unfavorably."

I was too well pleased to argue. After all, that day or a week later, mattered but little. The monster had not slain her up till then, and had had plenty of time in which to have done so, had such been his purpose. So I let it go as she stipulated, with one amendment.

"If that 'What-you-may-call-it' reappears in your room, you tell him my name and address; try

and make him comprehend *me*, then tell him to come and annoy *me* for a change and let you take a rest. I've an idea that I can cope with him . . . "

THAT NIGHT things did happen! Rhoda told me later what her experience was that night. Unpleasant, very, but fortunately brief; and in a way it was merely the preliminary to what I went through immediately afterward.

She had no sooner retired than the Thing appeared, seemingly more tangible than ever before. It made no attempt to actually molest her, but was obviously in a towering rage. It did everything but rave aloud. It stamped about the room, gnashing its teeth in a perfect frenzy; frowning and grimacing intimidatingly; shaking a huge fist in her face; pantomiming strangling her with its enormous hands; and plainly conveying through sheer force of wrath, that she'd gone to the ultimate limit of its patience. Above all, it made her understand that it was *jealous*! Which gave her her cue. It speaks well for her spirit that she faced the ugly apparition with a smile of contempt, jeered at it, and demanded in a whisper:

"If you're jealous of Randall Crone, why don't you go and try to bully him, instead of acting like a coward by tormenting me all the time?"

To make a good job of it, she exerted all her will to picture me and my abode so clearly that he could catch her thought-images. And after a bit she succeeded; for a look of comprehension and hatred came over the savage features, and a second afterward the apparition vanished from her room.

I'D BEEN READING and at the same time hoping that the Thing would pay me a visit that night. I had no idea as to how to cope with it. I do not claim to be a great hero, but had the Devil himself threatened Rhoda's peace of mind, though he came to me with horns, barbed tail, talons all sharpened, cloven hoofs, flaming eyes, breathing sulfur fumes, and with his white-hot pitchfork raised to strike, still I would have fought him to the best of my ability and trusted to luck to defeat him somehow. But I didn't intend to be caught asleep and off guard if I could help myself. Hence I sat and read.

And it came!

The same huge savage warrior that Rhoda had so graphically described. And the instant it assumed visibility, I knew that I was in for a most unpleasant time. The utter malignity of its expression proclaimed that here was a being to whom the very ideas of

mercy, reason, or even caution, were completely unknown.

It had the power of rendering itself visible, but could not make itself audible, although had it spoken, I'd been none the wiser, for I could not have understood whatever uncouth language might have been its native tribal tongue. But it certainly could and did make its thoughts register on my brain. He—for there's no need to longer call the Thing "it"—warned me very emphatically that *he* owned that red-headed woman; had owned her since the world was young, and always would own her till long after the world died of old age; and that if I wanted to remain all in one piece I'd best never go near her again. All this was punctuated by flourishing an enormous knotted—spectral—club which he wielded in one huge fist.

I never did like being bullied!

And the more that infernal savage phantom raved, the less I liked it. A slow anger began to burn within me. I had my own ideas about his asserted ownership of Rhoda. I wasn't conceited enough to think that I owned her, but I was quite sure that *he* didn't! While as to me staying away from her simply because he bade me do so . . .

I came to my feet, "seeing red" literally, and hurled myself at him with all my inhibitions inherited from civilized ancestry wholly in

abeyance. I was fully as much a savage as ever he had been! My entire being was filled with but one desire—to get my hands, aye, my teeth even, to working on him; to batter, to rend, to tear, kick, bite, gouge, and strangle until he was . . .

Something seemed to burst within my skull; a terrific blaze of scarlet light which blinded me for a bit—in my ears was a roaring like to the four winds of the world colliding simultaneously—a queer rushing sensation as if I were hurtling through the boundless abyss of space . . .

I REGAINED consciousness . . . I was in a village of some fifty-odd stone huts. Low round buildings they were, wherefrom smoke rose lazily into the air through holes in the high-pitched peak-roofs. It was late in the day, for the long shadows stretched almost eastward. Skin-clad men and women moved about the huts. White of skin they were, the majority light-haired, with blue or gray eyes. The women for the most part were short, broad, stocky of build; none of them really bad-looking, yet none really comely, let alone any of them having even a remote approach to beauty. Their faces were too stolid, and their voices were too harsh to render any of them attractive.

The men were proportionately taller, equally as broad, their faces more savage in expression; and all, even in the comparative safety of their own village, were armed with a various weapons—a stone knife in a skin girdle, or a short stone-headed spear carried in one brawny hand; or a stone ax; or a knotted club; but I saw no missile weapons such as bows and arrows or slings; nor did any of the warriors bear shields.

I saw myself as one of their number; knew myself as Ran Kron, a savage youth, a mere stripling not as yet a warrior; still untried, longing, yearning, looking eagerly forward to that time when I might stand with these hard-faced warriors in the whirl and tumult of a battle, that I might prove myself a man.

Wherefore I exercised at all the warlike pastimes and practises and in my spare time haunted the abode of old Juhor the Snake, the tribe's most highly skilled weapon-maker.

TO RETURN to this present time in which I now write—I realize how difficult it is to make plain how I knew all this which I've just described. All that I can say is—I did know. The same difficulty is confronting me in regard to what now follows. I can only write it as I knew it to be occurring while I was living in

that phase of my existence. I knew, too, the experiences of others, insofar as those were intertwined with my own. So from here on, for a while at least, I must write in the third person instead of the first person, singular . . .

JUHOR THE SNAKE, old, bent, crippled, and incredibly wrinkled, looked up from his work of chipping and polishing at the head of a green-stone war-ax he was making. A crafty gleam shone, transient, in his one good eye, as he beheld the tribe's mightiest fighting-man passing some few yards from where he, Juhor, sat at the door of his stone hut.

"Ho, Athak, Great Warrior! Athak the Swift! Athak the Terrible! Come and see!"

"Well?" he snarled.

Juhor the Snake indicated the wellnigh completed jade ax-head.

"What of that O mighty one?" he asked with the pride of a master craftsman.

Athak inspected it critically, with the shrewd scrutiny of another master craftsman, which he was, albeit no weapon-maker but a user of them instead.

"Put a handle to it," he commanded.

"Not, yet," Juhor objected. "It is too heavy for its size. No warrior could wield it for very long.

In steady fighting it would soon tire the strongest arm."

"A lie," snarled the surly giant. "It could not tire *my* arm to use it through a whole day's steady fighting!"

"Not all men are as Athak," flattered the old man.

"That is true," nodded Athak. "Put a handle to it, and we will see how heavy it is. Soon shall I return. Have it waiting." And with that he strode off.

Juhor the Snake smiled slyly to himself. Things were going well for him, very well indeed. So, carefully and skilfully and patiently too, he tugged and strained at the wet rawhide lashings which, drying would shrink and bind helve and head till both were as rigid as if but one piece.

Some two hours later the shadow of Athak fell again athwart old Juhor's gnarled and twisted body. The old weapon-maker looked up in feigned surprise.

"The ax," Athak demanded,

Juhor indicated it where it leaned against his door-post. Athak closed his huge fist about the thick, tough oaken handle. A smile of ferocious pleasure came over his usually stolid features the instant he lifted the weapon, while into his eyes came a covetous light such as nothing in all his life had ever aroused before.

"Truly, a weapon worthy of even me," he rumbled. "Its price, O Juhor?"

"Canst thou pay it, O Athak?"

"Whatever be the price, I will pay it. That ax shall be mine!"

"Thine after it be paid for," nodded the cripple. "Neither thou, O Athak, nor any other in this tribe shall own that war-ax till it be paid for."

"No?" Athak sneered. "Look now, Juhor the Snake. In my grasp is thy handiwork. Since the price be so great, what shall hinder me, Athak the Terrible, from testing it on that old skull of thine? So shalt thou lose ax, price, and life all together!"

Juhor gazed calmly up at him.

"What shall hinder, O Athak the Fool? Only this! With every stroke, as I worked I breathed a charm, a curse, on the head of him who should possess that ax unearned. Strike if thou wilt. Juhor is old and crippled, and can not prevent thee!"

Athak hurriedly stood the ax against the wall and squatted down by Juhor.

"Nay," he rumbled, "I did but jest, old man! Name me the price I must pay for that wonder-ax. It will go hard with me if I earn in not."

"It is a long tale, Athak the Chief," said Juhor. "I must tell it in mine own way. Hast time and patience to listen?"

"Aye," grunted Athak. "Time enow, patience too, so be it ends in my ownership of that ax."

"Harken, then!" Juhor settled himself more comfortably, relaxing perceptibly indeed, for up till that moment he had not been sure if Athak would prove to be the man he, Juhor, had hoped for; or if it would be necessary to tempt some other mighty warrior with the bait of that great jade-headed war-ax. For a long moment the gnarled old cripple sat silent; then:

"As a little boy, O Athak, dost recall that in those days Juhor was tall and straight and a warrior even as thou art now?"

"War-chief thyself, for a while," Athak nodded, "if I recall aright."

"True, O Athak! And now—Juhor the Snake, as thou seest! Broken, twisted, old and ugly. Maker of weapons and—dealer in magic, among other things. But in those days whereof I now speak, I was young, strong and restive. In war, Juhor was the foremost; in peace, unable to sit day by day while the women worked. Nay, I hunted big animals, and was a crafty hunter, too. Also I traveled much, visited other tribes, and strange sights did I see.

"ONE SOFT SUMMER I journeyed far to the northward. Into a country of hills came I finally. Snow-crowned were those hills, robed in forests of pine and

spruce and hemlock; and the lakes of water, which were many, were very beautiful to behold. So pure were the waters that they seemed black to one looking down into them from a height. Oh, a very fair country, Athak, but inhabited by a race of devils in the semblance of men.

"For as I slept one night on the banks of a small lake, all unaware that foes were nigh, the light of my fire was observed by watchful eyes. And I awoke at the dawning with two strong warriors atop of me! Of course I struggled, but to what avail? Two had leapt on me, but a dozen more stood ready to aid them, were there need. So they bound Juhor, and bore him trussed like a wild beast, to their tribal village.

"A hundred houses of stone were in that village. A high stone wall enclosed them safely. Only one gateway pierced that wall, and it was so narrow that two men with spears might easily hold it against a strong war-party.

"Into the largest building they bore me and threw me into a stone-floored room. Afterward I learned that the building was their temple, where, with horrible rites, they worshipped their devil-god.

"For a day and a night I lay there, bound hand and foot; hungry, too, although I was filled full with rage; but to tell truth, fearsome also, for I knew not what

fate lay before me; albeit I could guess, to some extent; and my guesses were not of enjoyable matters — to me, at least.

"When on the second morning there entered one bearing food and drink, I believed for a moment that I was dreaming, or had gone mad and was seeing that which was not.

"But then *she* spoke . . .

"And to my enchanted ears the sound of her voice was as the song of birds in the golden springtime of the world. The sight of her was like to the glory of the sun in the first bright hour of the day. Tall she was — not squatty as are our women — full-breasted, strong, yet shapely in body and limbs. Blue were her eyes — blue as were the waters of the mountain lake where I was captured. Pink were her cheeks as are the blooms of the wild roses. Scarlet were her lips, even as the blood from a fresh-dealt wound; no snow ashine in the light of the full moon ever gleamed so brightly as did her strong white teeth; and her head was crowned with a great mass of hair red as the flames from a burning pitch-pine log — hair that fell almost to her feet.

"Forgotten were food, drink, hunger, captivity, apprehension; and I knew but one desire . . .

"Her I wanted, and her I would have; aye, though afterward I died

ten deaths of torture before I were finally slain.

"WITH ONE powerful surge I burst the rawhide bonds against which I'd struggled in vain all through a day and a night! And she did not flinch, nor did she manifest aught of fear as I rose to my feet. Her blue eyes lit with a flame matching my own fire! Her scarlet lips smiled approval and she laid one finger, cautioningly, on her lip, in token of silence. Setting down the vessels of food and drink, she came, unflinchingly, straight into my open arms.

" 'O Man of Might,' she whispered — for their language is very like to ours, and I could understand her fairly well — 'you have taken my heart in your keeping. Yet how shall it profit us? I am the Red Witch of Ugdarr, the 'God-Who-Eats-Human-Hearts!' I am sworn, virgin, to his service; and you, O Strong One, are destined to provide his next meal!'

"For a bit I stood afraid. To die in battle was one thing, but to die helpless, a sacrifice to some devil-god named 'Ugdarr', who ate human hearts . . . Then I caught fast hold on my waning courage.

" 'When and how do I?'

" 'Three moons hence,' she said sadly. 'Four times in the year — and the last time was but a few days before you came. You will be fettered

by one ankle atop of the great stone altar at the feet of the image of Ugdarr. You will be given any weapon you may select—ax, club, spear or knife. Three young warriors, desirous of proving themselves before the assembled tribe, will attack you, one at a time, armed with a similar weapon to your choice, but their ankles will not be bound! If you wound one so that he falls to the ground, his heart will be torn at once from his breast and given to the village dogs as something unfit for Ugdarr. But even should you slay all three, still are you doomed. You have but one advantage. They may wound you till you can not stand longer, but slay you outright they dare not. To be acceptable to Ugdarr, your heart must come from your yet living breast while you still breathe, however feebly. And—the tribe will eat your flesh!

"'No hope of escape,' I whispered through dry lips.

"'None,' she replied drearily.

"In my heart I swore that if I might not escape Ugdarr's hungry maw, at least I would make a mock of him . . . And I did, Athak!

"Each day thereafter she came bringing food and drink, for part of her service to Ugdarr lay in feeding Ugdarr's victim. And the devil-god wanted his sacrifice well

nourished, that his heart might be more of a dainty morsel.

"Not long dared she tarry at any one time during the daylight hours, but again and again in the dead of night, when none suspected, she crept to my side and we lay in each other's arms till the first gray hint of dawn . . . and I knew, finally, that I had made a mockery of the devil-god Ugdarr . . .

"YOUNG WAS I in those days, Athak! I had no thought for the woman, whether or not her tribe would mete out vengeance upon her for daring to give herself to me—me, the captive destined for Ugdarr's gullet; her, the virgin priestess who had violated her office; but later I was to think—oh, many, many times!

"For one night we were discovered, despite all her imagined caution. An old, old man, servant also of the devil-god, whose office it was to cut out the hearts of the sacrifices, became suspicious. Nay, he came not alone, but with a dozen ugly-faced warriors at his back . . .

"Surprised as we were, in store for me was another surprise when, before all the tribe at the following noon, that old man pronounced our dooms.

"'The man-captive is no more fit for Ugdarr's sacrifice,' he said sternly. 'He shall be tortured thus

--he shall be tied to a post and each member of the tribe, from the youngest child to the oldest man or woman, shall throw at him one stone each. If still he lives, maimed as he will be, let him be borne to that place where first he was found and there left with the curse of Ugdarr upon him. Should he die, there's an end. If he lives, then he is free to go whither he will, save to return to this village. But should he crawl back here, then he shall be burned, slowly to ashes.

"For the woman who was a maid--this! Witch of Ugdarr she was, and Witch of Ugdarr she shall remain till the child reach adolescence. Then shall she rear it to serve the god. If a boy, he shall become a priest. If a girl, she shall take her mother's place as Witch; and then this evil-doer who preferred the caresses of a captive to the favor of the great Ugdarr shall be bound at Ugdarr's feet and there she shall be stoned to death by the tribe--and the village dogs shall devour her body. I have spoken."

"So, O Athak, you behold Juhor the Broken One! 'Snake' they name me, partly because I have wisdom and magic of a sort. But at first they so called me because I *crawled* one day into this my native village--how I made that long, terrible journey, broken, shattered, maimed, warped and

twisted as I am, I know not. It was all a horrible torment like a dreadful dream of the night. Yet I did it, my brain aflame with but one idea--vengeance!

"Now, O Athak, Great War-Chief, thou knowest the price of the ax--the beautiful green-stone war-ax! Not with that ugly wooden handle, either, but with this . . ." and Juhor held up a long, finely carved handle of pure ivory! Athak's eyes fairly blazed at the sight. He could hardly speak.

"Ax and handle, *mine*, if . . ."

"If thou wilt make war upon the tribe of Ugdarr, slaying man, woman and child, save only the Red Witch and her--my--*our*--child: bringing her and the child, if both still live, here to me . . ."

Athak nodded briefly.

"I am War-Chief," he said quietly. "The warriors and the young men will follow where I lead. I take the ax with me. Wielding that, not even this 'Eater-of-hearts' Ugdarr himself shall withstand the war-frenzy of Athak the Strong!"

"I said," old Juhor pointed out, "that the ax must be earned ere it be possessed. Otherwise a curse . . ."

"Athak has never lied yet! He does not begin now, even to gain that wonder-ax! It will be earned! Thy price will be paid as soon as I can rouse the warriors and

reach that devil-god's village. But I use that ax in the fighting, or I stir not a single step on thine errand!"

For a long while Juhor stared at Athak. Then he nodded as if fully satisfied at what he read in the eyes of the great war-chief.

"The ivory handle from a mammoth's tusk shall be fitted ere morning," he promised. "In Athak's grasp shall the magicwar-ax earn its own purchase price. Juhor has said it!"

The exultant yell pealing from Athak's throat startled the entire village.

And Ran Kron, the untried stripling who aspired to the status of a warrior, sitting anigh and hanging breathless upon every word falling from the lips of Juhor the Snake, saw his opportunity and promptly grasped at it.

"Ho, Athak the Great Chief," he cried boldly. "Here is one for thy war-party!"

Athak stared contemptuously at the slight figure. "Girl with the semblance of a boy," he jeered. "Thy mother made a mistake . . ."

And a lightning-swift lunge with a slender white flint knife in the hands of the infuriated youth well-nigh despoiled old Juhor of his long-plotted vengeance, then and there.

"Thou fool ten times accursed," shrilled the old weapon-maker. But Athak laughed, a hearty, roaring

bellow wherein was no trace of anger.

"Nay," he told Juhor. "Let be! None are born full-grown and proven! The boy has the heart of a warrior. Even thus would I have replied to a like insult. He marches with the *other* fighting-men!"

THE NEXT NIGHT the old men sat in a circle, thumping on snakeskin-headed war-drums, and the old women in a still larger outer circle banged and clattered cymbals of flat bone plates from the shoulder-blades of the larger animals.

The old men chanted and the old women shrilled at intervals, while every male of fighting size and age danced and leapt and pranced and shouted boastfully, waving and brandishing their weapons. Finally, as the fire in the center of the circles died down, each man tossed his weapon on to a pile in the dancing-space in token that even as the weapons were all together, so would each man be at one with all the others of the war-party. Athak, as leader, tossed his newly acquired jade-headed war ax atop of all the rest, so that when the weapons were lifted, his would be first, even as he was first in command. As his wonder-weapon—the tale of which had already been bruited about the village—fell atop of the rest, the war-

riors broke into their deep-voiced battle-cry:

"A-Houk ! A-Houk ! A-Houk !"

Athak was a good leader. Never once did the war-party see any one, nor were they seen by any wandering hunter from the morning they left their native village until they sighted the walls of Ugdarr's people. It called for craft and strategy to achieve this, but Athak's brain was equal to the task.

The first intimation on the gray dawning that the people of Ugdarr had of enemy proximity was the deep-toned:

"A-Houk ! A-Houk ! A-Houk !"

Into the undefended gate surged the men of Athak's band—for two skilled spear-throwers, at Athak's command, had crawled close an hour previously, while yet it was dark, and had made sure that the two men guarding the gateway slept the last long sleep.

Counter-yells arose of:

"Hah-Yah ! Yah-Yah !"

And out from their huts like a swarm of angry hornets poured the men of Ugdarr. After all, it was not an all-day battle. At most, there were some hundred or a hundred and fifty savages locked together in one wild whirl of clubs, knives, spears and axes—a struggle in which quarter was neither asked nor proffered.

ONE SAVAGE FIGHT is very

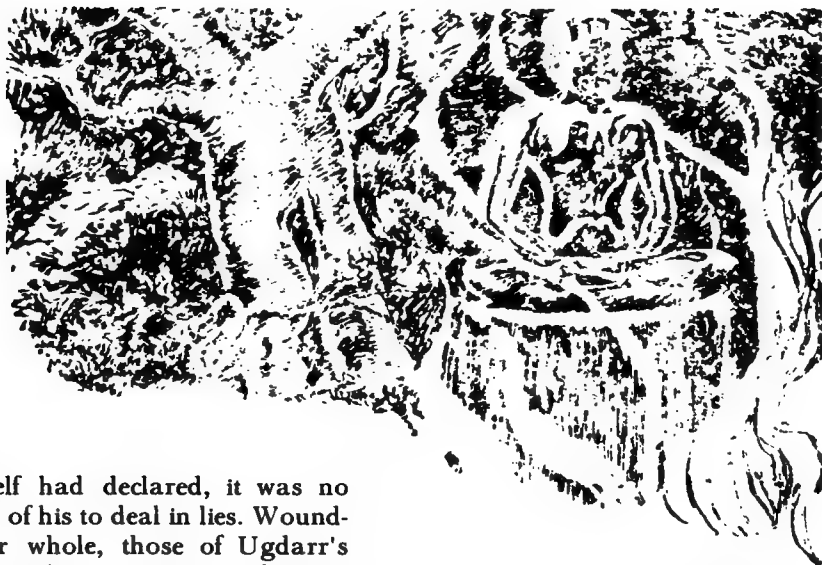
much the same as another, the only thing which distinguished that one being that for the first time in his life Athak the Strong One was laid prostrate on his back. A fallen enemy had stabbed him in the calf of his leg at the same moment that another man of Ugdarr had hit him on the head with a club.

Ran Kron, fighting madly at the left side of his gigantic chief, promptly repaid the clubman by practically eviscerating him with the sixteen-inch stone knife which formed the young warrior's sole weapon, and then bestriding Athak's body, swinging in both hands the club he'd wrested from his victim as he fell. It was but a moment in which Athak lay dazed; then he was on his feet again, bellying "A-Houk" as lustily as ever, and smiting even more furiously with the great jade ax. But he found breath between blows to shout to Ran Kron:

"No longer art thou an untried youth, but a warrior! Shalt be made Athak's blood-brother when this fighting ends !"

If the stripling had fought madly before, after that promise of Athak's he became like a youthful demon unleashed. And, in consequence, he was bleeding from a dozen minor wounds by the time the affray ended.

And its ending was complete. The huge war-chief had made a definite pledge to Juhor, and as he



himself had declared, it was no habit of his to deal in lies. Wounded or whole, those of Ugdarr's people who survived the fighting were dragged before their own devil-god and knocked on the heads; all save a few strong-bodied women who were kept to act as beasts of burden and carry loot for their captors on their homeward journey; and even those would be slain as soon as the trip was ended.

From these women, questioned by Athak, it was learned that Juhor's Red Witch of Ugdarr had been slain a few years previously. But she had left a daughter, Red Dawn . . .

"Where . . ."

Nobody knew . . .

Athak picked up one woman and flung her, bodily, into a fire blazing near at hand. By the time

the shrieking wretch crawled out, the other women recalled that in the Temple of Ugdarr there were a number of hidden rooms . . .

It was Ran Kron who found her. What magical words he used, none knew, but she listened to him without fear, and came forth from the building hand-in-hand with the youth. Nor did she relinquish her hold when he brought her before Athak.

"Which is the captive?" shouted the chief, in high good humor. Made bold by Athak's friendliness, Ran Kron grinned and replied:

"I am, O Athak!"

The chief stared a second, then grinned back.

"Had I the right, I'd say, 'Take



illustration
by C. C. Senf

her, lad!" But she goes to old Juhor. It is for him to say what disposal shall be made of her."

JUHOR THE SNAKE heard the screaming tumult heralding the returned war-party, and smiled his wry smile. When the gigantic form of Athak stood before him, the old weapon-maker looked up calmly, although deep within himself he was in a storm of emotion. Athak's right hand grasped the great war-ax, while his left he held

fast-clamped on the shoulder of a slim, beautiful girl whose hair was a flaming red-golden glory.

"Ax and purchase-price, O Juhor the Snake. Athak keeps his word!"

"The ax is paid for, and is all thine, O Athak the Mighty! Upon the ax is no curse. Nay, so long as thou shalt hold it in battle,

none may overcome thee. Dost want the maid, too, O Athak? None better could I give her to.

"Not I, Juhor! The ax fills my one desire. Rather, I would that thou give her to my blood-brother, Ran Kron. He wants her, and I think he has her favor."

"Give *her*—to—that—*cub*! Athak, dost jest?"

"Cub?" roared the chief. "My blood-brother, I said! None braver than he ever went forth to war from this village. Swift of foot, great of heart, fearless, and a deadly killer with that long knife of his, I myself saw him account for five in the fighting at Ugdarr's village. Saved my life, too, *mine*, Athak the Chief! Young he is yet, it is true. Had he greater war-wisdom, and more years, I'd make him second in command under me. And *you* call him—*cub*!"

"Girl," said Juhor, hastily veering away from the subject which had aroused Athak's wrath, "thou art my daughter. Hath thy mother . . ."

"I heard him"—she indicated Athak—"name thee Juhor the Snake. My mother, before they stoned her to death in Ugdarr's village, told me a tale of a captive, Juhor the Strong One, who was stoned by the tribe because of her, who was borne into the wilderness, and there left to live or die even as Ugdarr chose. Art

thou in truth that same Juhor?"

The old cripple could only nod, for words failed him. The girl looked too, too like another and elder Red Dawn. . . The girl flung herself impulsively on her knees beside him, drew his old head to her young breast, smoothing his sparse white locks with her slim soft hands, crooning over him . . . The warriors turned away at a grunt from Athak.

"This is no time to forward thy suit, my brother," the chief told the young Ran Kron. And the youth nodded, understandingly. He could wait.

RED DAWN was the most beautiful woman the tribe had ever beheld, and many were the young men who sought her from old Juhor. But to one and all he gave the same reply:

"Her heart and her desire are all for Ran Kron. She is my daughter and shall please herself."

So in due time the day came when before the whole people Juhor tied Red Dawn and Ran Kron together with a strong cord, calling down curses many and horrible upon the head of whoso should attempt to sever that bond. And the tribe, with feasting, and mirth, and jest, celebrated the wedding. Yet some there were who reasoned that as the girl was the most lovely, and Athak was the most mighty, she should have been mated with

the great chief rather than with the youthful warrior.

But when some, made bold by drunkenness, ventured to hint thus to Athak, he roared with laughter. Then, for he had imbibed largely of strong drink himself, he became inspired with a most wondrous idea.

"Juhor," he shouted, "in thy hands lies the power to bind the cord of wedlock, where thine own offspring are concerned. Thou hast wed Ran Kron to Red Dawn. Now, haste thee and wed me to thine other child!"

"My—other—child," Juhor stared in wonderment. "Nay, O Athak! I have no child other than Red Dawn."

Athak held up his jade war-ax.

"This," he shouted, so that all heard. "The child that thou didst create. Wed me to her, for I love her more than I ever could love my woman of flesh and blood."

The grim fancy caught the imaginations of the people, and they clamored for the ceremony. Juhor, knowing Athak's disposition, and seeing that he was at that pitch of drunkenness wherein good humor abruptly changes to fury when crossed, took a fresh cord and performed the rite with all the needful words and curses.

Again Athak tossed the weapon high in air above his head.

"Athak's wife!" he bellowed. "*A-Houk! A-Houk! A-Houk!*"

Catching fire from his fire, the warriors responded in savage chorus: "*A-Houk! A-Houk! A-Houk!*"

Yet one old hag there was—own sister to Athak's mother who had died giving a man-child to the world—who dwelt in Athak's hut and cooked his food for him, who sat and glowered while all others made merry. She was getting old and lazy, and had long urged the giant chief to bring a younger woman into the hut as his wife. All through the feasting, the old woman said naught about what was in her mind, but next morning, well knowing that Athak's head was aching fit to burst, she queried with her tongue laden with venom:

"Was your stone bride kind to you in the night, O Athak, and were her caresses sweet?" Then, with a cackle of derision, as he glared at her: "She can never give you a son to boast that Athak the Mighty was his father. She can not cook for you. She can deal wounds, but she can not heal wounds with the poultices of soothing leaves . . . better had you taken Juhor's *other* daughter . . ." And with that, dodging a chunk of wood hurled at her by the exasperated chief, she fled the hut, still cackling evilly.

And thenceforward she lost no chance to prod Athak about his folly in "choosing the wrong

daughter of Juhor" until in time her evil hints and slurs bore fruit. She was helped in her work by the fact that since Ran Kron had had one taste of war, he'd found it so greatly to his liking that twice afterward he'd gone out with small parties of young and ambitious men; and in both cases had easily proved himself the foremost. And the hag hinted to Athak that his prestige as chief was seriously threatened by this young upstart—as she termed the youth.

CAME A DAY when Athak harkened and took her gibing seriously; so that thereafter he began casting meaningful glances at Red Dawn whenever they met. Worse still occurred when, in one of his drunken spells, he sought to drag her into his hut against her will.

His girl-wife's shrieks reached Ran Kron's ears where he sat in converse with a group of other young warriors. With a cat-like rush he hurled himself at the would-be ravisher. Twice and thrice his long flint knife stabbed, lightning-quick, drawing blood and eliciting a yell of pain each time he struck.

Completely lost to all thoughts of blood-brotherhood, and driven by a two-fold lust—to have Ran Kron's wife and Ran Kron's life, Athak let go his hold on the shrieking, struggling Red Dawn and drew his great jade ax from his

belt. Ran Kron, seeing, leaped back, snatching a spear from the hand of a bystander, and promptly lunged with it at the face of the giant chief.

For a while it was either man's fight. Mighty as Athak was, enraged, too, so that flecks of foam dripped from his lips, still Ran Kron kept him busy; dodging, leaping, parrying, or evading the sweep of the great green-flashing ax; from time-to-time getting in a thrust with his spear that drew blood each time, but never deep enough to reach a vital spot and end matters.

Yet, despite all his efforts, step by step the lighter man was forced to retreat—suddenly a yell arose from the onlookers, partly in triumph, partly in warning, according to their sympathies. With a feeling that the end was nigh, Ran Kron realized that he'd reached the brink of the river, and that back of him lay a fifty-foot drop to the swift, swollen, muddy waters below. In sheer desperation he hurled his spear straight at the face of his giant opponent.

Athak saw it coming, too swift for him to dodge it. He threw up both arms in front of his face. The stone spearhead drove deep into his right forearm, and a spurt of blood followed, staining the ivory helve of his battle-ax a bright crimson.

In despair, Ron Kron whipped

out his long stone knife, prepared to sell his life as dearly as possible. Athak bellowed his rage, and moved a step closer. The great ax swung up above his tousled head and swept down again on its death-dealing arc. Ran Kron, summoning up his fast-waning strength, dodged again, bending his torso far back. Athak's hands were too blood-smeared from the wound in his forearm. The ivory ax-handle slipped in his grasp. Flying through the air, it struck Ran Kron a glancing blow on the side of his head, stunning him. The young warrior, his balance overborne, went backward over the edge of the low bluff; and, with a sullen double splash, Ran Kron and the great jade ax that had overthrown him to his death disappeared together beneath the surface of the swollen stream . . .

NOW, HOW I, Randall Crone, know this latter part which ensued after Ran Kron fell into the river, I can not tell; for I do not understand. But know it I do, however.

Athak sank to the ground, gasping from his last terrific exertion. Red Dawn would have thrown herself into the river, there to join her man, Ran Kron, but was seized and held by certain ones who sought to curry favor with Athak.

Juhor the Snake hobbled up, stood in front of Athak, and shook

his gnarled old fist in the giant's face. The old man was fairly aquiver with the rage consuming him. Twice he opened his mouth and twice he closed it again before he could find words to express himself.

"Was it for this, thou fool, that I made for thee that magic ax? Did I not wed thee to the ax at thine express command, by thine own choice? Did I not lay curses many and deep upon the head of whoso should part ye twain who were one in wedlock? And now, it is thine own hands which have flung the magic ax into the deep, deep river!

"Now I, Juhor the Snake prophesy to thee, O Athak the Fool! Thou shalt go accursed for all thy remaining days upon the earth. Evil shall befall thee ever, and when thou shalt die, in outer darkness shalt thou wander till once again the magic ax which thou thyself didst name 'Athak's Wife' shall return to thine embrace! Athak the Accursed, I, Juhor, have spoken thy doom!"

Athak staggered to his feet and clutched one great hand upon the old man's shoulder.

"Aye," he snarled, "thou hast spoken—thine own doom, Juhor the Snake!" One shove he gave the old cripple, and Juhor, with a single quavering cry, vanished over the edge of the all-devouring river . . .

ONE MIGHT SAY that I'd been dreaming; or that I'd been in a trance state and had left my body and gone into the astral plane—but neither hypothesis would account full for the facts.

For I learned, upon my return to my Twentieth Century personality, that I'd been gone for a considerable time, *body and all!* My room had been found vacant and my bed unslept in, the morning after I'd been visited by the phantom of Athak.

Then as totally unproclaimed as my absence had been, I reappeared. And I had considerable difficulty in explaining matters to those most interested in my movements—business associates, and others. Of course, I hastened to Rhoda as quickly as possible, and from her lips I had full confirmation of my strange experience. For she, too, had "vanished" insofar as her everyday environment was concerned, and she, too, had just reappeared. I did not have to make any explanations to her. She knew! She'd been through the same sort of adventures as had I. In other words, she had suddenly awakened from a sound sleep to find herself Red Dawn, the young Witch of Ugdarr! In fact, she was able to tell me the part I did not know, and describe the episode after Athak threw old Juhor over the bluff. Yet what she told was but little after all.

Athak had dragged her to his hut, where she naturally anticipated just about the worst fate that could happen. In a frenzy of fear, she had tried to stab herself, but Athak prevented that by hitting her with his fist the instant she caught up a knife.

But he had struck too hard, and thereby cheated himself of the woman he coveted so greatly that he'd slain his own chosen blood-brother in order to get her for himself. She recalled the terrific concussion of his fist against the side of her face. Ensued a brief period of unconsciousness, naturally, and when her consciousness returned, she was again Rhoda Day, in her own room, and her mother was bending over her, demanding a trifle crossly:

"Rhoda, where in the world have you been for the last few days, and why did you go away without saying anything about it to me, before you started?"

As to what happened to Athak, we neither of us know; but could easily imagine, knowing him as well and unfavorably as we did. To use Rhoda's words:

"He probably went from bad to worse, just as Juhor predicted, until some one did the world a service by ridding it of his presence; and he has since to use Juhor's very words, 'dwelt in outer darkness'. But in some manner he—or his spirit, rather—located my

whereabouts, and he seems determined to assert his imagined ownership. Probably he doesn't even know that he is dead and hasn't a body in which to function any more."

Wherein she was wrong. Later again, we learned that Athak knew quite well that he was devoid of a body. All he was waiting for was a good chance to acquire one, in order to resume his age-old devilment just where he'd been compelled to leave off by reason of hitting Red Dawn too hard and thus cheating himself of her possession.

Apparently old Juhor's curse had taken effect, and Athak had, in truth, dwelt in outer darkness instead of coming back to earth via a rebirth, as we two had done. But the more we speculated, the more intricate and involved the problems became; so that finally we quit all speculating and preserved a policy of watchful waiting instead.

Meantime, at my urgency, Rhoda capitulated and we managed to fool the savage phantom. Traveling on our honeymoon trip, we kept to the crowded cities, knowing that for us to isolate ourselves would best please the vindictive ghost who so hated us. In modern hotels and amongst throngs of people, he'd be out of his element.

But honeymoons, end eventually, in this workaday world, and

dollar-chasing is a very necessary pursuit if one would continue to enjoy life in its modern phase. So, regretfully, we returned home, not, of course, to Rhoda's parents, but to a little place of our own.

And Athak turned up the first night we were there!

HIS FURY, when he grasped the situation, was something to tremble at. His futile attempts to wreak either or both of us bodily injury, had they not been so frightful, would have been ludicrous. For over half the night he carried on his antics. It was of no avail to turn off the light; so I left it burning. Rhoda was so unstrung that I feared a permanent shock to her nervous system would result.

I was angry, not with the ordinary type of wrath common to every one at times, but that same savage ugliness I'd experienced once before. Much more of it, and I'd again become Ran Kron, the young savage warrior . . . But Rhoda sensed the change taking place in me, and begged so earnestly that I control myself, that somehow, to please her, I succeeded in fighting back my rage. At that, I could not have done it, had she not whispered:

"Randall, my husband, for my sake be very careful! Can not you see that you are rapidly getting into a state such as will best please him and render us acces-

sible by translating us again to his plane, where he *can* function?"

It was a hard task, even then, but I did it. Then I had what I considered a happy thought, and carried it out; and it did win for us a modicum of rest from Athak's rage, *if* only for a short time. Deliberately I kissed Rhoda, then grinned triumphantly at the frenzied savage ghost; and for a second, I thought that Athak the Terrible would disintegrate from the hell-storm of wrath and jealous hate that simple act aroused on his part. But then he turned sulky, withdrew until he seemed to merge with the wall itself, and there remained, glowering. And finally we fell asleep and left him to sulk all he would.

But the next night he was back again, twice as ugly as before. And for many a night after that.

Then I thought up another bright idea, or deemed it one until . . .

IT WAS SUMMER, and the nights were warm, so we took to sleeping in a rose arbor in the garden. For the first night there was absolutely no sigh of Athak. But on the second night, Rhoda wakened me from a sound slumber with the startled exclamation:

"Randall, what *is* that repulsive odor?"

One sniff told me instantly that it was the acrid, decayed-cucumber

scent of a copperhead snake! Very cautiously, holding my breath in stark fear, I pressed the switch of a flashlight and swept the near-by ground with its bright rays. Luckily I managed to reach a stick with which I broke the reptile's back before it could — *ugh!* I shuddered at thought of what might have happened. And, somehow, in my mind, I associated that snake's arrival into our garden of peace with Athak's hatred. And instantly, although I heard no sound, I was aware of a burst of unholy glee that fully confirmed my conviction.

Next day I bought an automatic pistol equipped with a silencer, and a box of cartridges. Then I did that which would cause any alienist to suspect my mental condition; for I had every bullet extracted from the loaded shells and replaced by silver ones. I'd read somewhere that silver bullets are efficacious against such as Athak; and I was open to conviction. But when I laid in that equipment I unwittingly played into Athak's hands, completely.

Nightly thereafter I kept the loaded pistol within reach, and for several nights we were undisturbed. Yet always we had an uncomfortable sense of Athak's presence, albeit he kept himself invisible. Actually, I began to think that in some manner he'd sensed that I was organized for him with a potent weapon, and that he was

correspondingly cautious about bringing matters to a definite show-down; which proves how little I know about the unseen world and still less about the abilities of those who dwell therein.

We had gotten so that, we could fall asleep almost immediately after retiring in our rose arbor. It was around midnight one night that I awoke with the certitude that we had been outwitted and that even then we were exposed to some unutterably ghastly horror. Instinctively I grasped the pistol and threw off the safety catch. Rhoda had awakened at the same time, and we sat up simultaneously. She screamed, once, and I felt the cold sweat of fear break out all over me.

Not ten yards away was the phantom form of Athak. A leer of cruel, anticipatory triumph was on his ugly face, and he had reason for it, too; for although he himself was but a phantom, there was nothing intangible about the monstrous dog he had somehow introduced into our garden. It was just a dog; yes; but such a dog! It loomed as big as a calf! I learned, later, that the brute was a Tibetan mastiff belonging to a dog-fancier dwelling some twenty miles distant. And that breed of dog is one of the most ferocious of the entire canine species.

Its eyes were aflame with fury,

and as they were fixed unwaveringly upon me, it was not difficult to imagine what was coming next. Its jaws dripped slaver, and its lips were drawn back in a soundless snarl. Its whole body was aquiver with pent-up energy.

And even as I noted all this in one horrified glance, the phantom chief waved an arm in a gesture of command, and the huge beast launched itself straight at me! One bound brought it half-way but then I brought the pistol into action. I'd had a gunsmith do a little juggling with the inner works of that automatic; so that in a way, it was more a miniature machine-gun than a pistol. Once the trigger was pulled, provided it was held back, the shots were continuous till the magazine was empty. I intended, when I had it fixed like that, to put sufficient of those silver bullets into, or through, Athak, to make a thorough job of it, or him. But as things turned out, it was the dog that got the entire load; and it needed them all, too, squarely in its big skull, to stop its ferocious rush.

Even at that, the brute didn't die instantly, but fell on the ground almost at the entrance to the arbor, writhing and twitching in a fast-spreading pool of blood.

Athak's opportunity had arrived! That infernal savage had waited for just such a chance for

ages! The blood furnished him with the medium for materialization, and he promptly utilized it. Before I could reload the pistol by inserting a fresh-charged magazine clip into the butt, the metamorphosis was achieved. It was, to all intents and purposes, a flesh and blood savage from out the distant Ice Age who hurled his huge bulk at us, whirling a heavy bludgeon in one knotted fist!

RHODA GASPED, moaned feebly, and slumped to the floor of the rose arbor in a limp heap. And I, feeling that this was the end for us, and the consummation of Athak's triumph, nevertheless flung myself off the bed in one wild leap, to meet him and have it over with.

I had naught save that empty pistol still in my hand wherewith to put up a battle, and that was but a poor and futile thing beside the club Athak flourished. Yet in some manner I dodged his first stroke, retaliating by throwing my empty pistol into his face as hard as I could slam it. Luckily for me, it landed just where eyebrows and nose meet. For a second it dazed him, and he paused, even in his frenzy, to shake his head to clear his sight, I suppose. And, in that one second of reprieve, a miracle and naught else came to my aid, or I should not be here now to tell this tale . . .

Out of nowhere, apparently, appeared the gnarled, twisted, cripple form of old Juhor the Snake! Into my hands he thrust the ivory handle of a green-stone war-ax!

"*Heh-heh-heh!*" laughed the incredible apparition. "Once he stole your wife! It is only fitting that now you should have his!"

What strange power lay in that ancient war-ax? I know not, even now. But this I do know: No sooner had my hands closed in a firm grip on the handle than a terrific surge of commingled hate and strength suffused my entire body! I felt that my muscles had doubled — nay! infinitely multiplied in power to smite. I heaved the heavy ax aloft and moved toward my enemy. He saw the weapon, and hell flamed in his face and eyes. In a low, dreadful tone he spoke:

"Now! Long have I waited for this day! Red Dawn, and the green ax! Once again are both within my reach! O Fool, who thinks to stand against Athak the Mighty with his own war-ax; now shall I slay thee, and take both weapon and woman! Then shall she and I together eat your heart, raw, torn from out your yet warm body . . ."

He had no time for further boasting. With all the new strength that had flowed into me, I struck out at him. Skilled warrior that he was, he parried the ax-sweep with his club. Very craftily he

struck just back of the stone head, turning the stroke aside thereby. The shock of his blow jarred my arms clear to my shoulder-sockets. And swiftly following came his counterstroke. He delivered it horizontally at my head, but I bent my knees quickly, and the club barely grazed my hair. The momentum of his blow turned him a trifle, and I swiped back again with the ax, and that time, despite his backward leap, the ax drew blood from his side; not a deep cut, but still enough to madden him.

With a snarl of pure fiendishness he drove in a blow I could not evade, so lightning-swift it came. Fairly on my left arm it landed, and my whole side went numb as if suddenly paralyzed. I had only my right arm then with which to wield that ponderous stone war-ax, while my eon-old enemy still had two arms with which to swing his no less ponderous club.

The derisive sneer on his hateful face drove me beyond all semblance of caution. As if it had been naught but a light throwing-hatchet, I whirled up that great stone-headed ax in one hand and hurled it! So quickly did I move that he had no chance to raise his club in order to ward off that hurtling weapon.

Edge first it struck him in his barrel-like chest, driving deep in

through flesh and bone. With a bubbling grunt the breath went out of his lungs, followed by a gush of bloody froth. He threw both arms across his torso, hugging the ax-handle in his agony . . .

THE CRACKED VOICE of old Juhor rang out: "When Athak's wife returns to Athak's embrace, then shall the age-old curse lift; and Athak shall cease to dwell in outer darkness! *Athak the Mighty, get thee hence to the place appointed for all such as thou!*"

The giant stood swaying, his arms still clasping the handle of the ax. But as Juhor spoke his doom, he tottered and fell!

Unheeding aught else, I staggered wearily—for my strength left me even as Athak fell—over to where Rhoda lay, lifted her to the bed and turned—to see only a faint haze where a moment before had lain the gigantic materialized form of Athak the Terrible! As I looked, the haze vanished, too. Of old Juhor, the Snake there was no sign. There remained only the carcass of an enormous, dead dog; an empty automatic pistol; and a great, ivory-handled war-ax lying where I had dropped it. Oh, yes! And a great bruise on my left arm . . .

What is real, and what illusion, in this universe? Nobody knows, I least of all.

Juhor handed me that ax. I used it. Next day I hung it on the wall in my study. And that same evening I read in the newspaper that a jade-headed, ivory-handled battle-ax had been mysteriously abstracted some time in the night hours from a glass case in a scientific museum located over eight hundred miles from where I dwell, and had been missed the same morning I hung it on my wall! And the glass case had not been broken into, nor unlocked.

The news article went on to state

that the weapon owed its remarkable condition of preservation to the fact that it had been found fast-frozen in a huge fragment of ice that had "calved" from a glacier up under the Arctic Circle . . .

Oh, my very soul faints when I try to make coherence of my jumbled data! Yet out of it all, dimly I get this for my comfort: Time, and Space, both are as naught to the Self of man. Justice endures and Love is eternal; nor shall all the Powers of Darkness ever prevail against them!



For a different sort of witch entirely, we suggest that you read *Dona Diabla*, by Anna Hunger in the current (Fall 1967) issue of *STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES*. If your newsdealer is sold out, or doesn't carry this magazine, despair not—just turn to page 127 for further suggestions.

The Last Letter From Norman Underwood

by Larry Eugene Meredith

If you just carried the notion to its logical conclusion, the answer was elementary.

NORMAN UNDERWOOD moved to Northwood with his family, who opened the first super food market in these parts. It was a very progressive family and prospered selling groceries. The head of the family, Norman's barrel-chested, ash-haired father, served energetically on many town projects and councils, and the possibility is great that he would be our present mayor, if he hadn't died two summers ago. He was not an old man when he died; he was in his mid-fifties, seemingly in excellent health: but those always are the ones, who suddenly go. It was heart-attack.

Norman's mother, not too well herself, sold the market to one of the chains and with the two youngest girls, moved back to her home town to be near her family. The eldest girl married a local boy and they opened a small confectionary here. She seems to be doing rather well, but then, she was the only one of the children that inherited the aggressive qualities of the father. Norman, the only boy, also remained behind in Northwood for awhile, living freely on the money left him.

Norman Underwood was not at all like his father, a man who had taken a hand in town affairs

almost from the moment he arrived. No, the son was shy and retiring, not the least interested in politics. He still owned part interest in the supermarket, but he never ventured down to the store, leaving all the managing to the man the chain had sent down as overseer. There was no animosity between these partners; they were both satisfied with the arrangement.

There is only one explanation, at all, for Norman's behavior. He simply lived in the past. He enjoyed reading old books, musty yellowed volumes from the 19th century, with their intricate endless descriptions. He only liked American folk music: cowboy songs, hobo ballads, square dance reels.

It was the latter hobby that brought us together and began our friendship. It began several years back, when we were both in our middle-teens and members of Northwood's boy scout troop. It was a new troop. Northwood had never had a scouting program before and it was through the efforts of Norman's father that it got one. Mister Underwood had been appalled at the absents of opportunity for children in town and he was always introducing new activities for youngsters and teens.

Scouting was probably the only thing that Norman ever showed any ambition in and perhaps that is the reason his father preferred it above all the other improvements

he had brought to Northwood. Of course, Norman took well to scouting because it had similarities to pioneering with its camping in the woods and its basic crafts. It did not take Norman long to work his way up the ranks and gather merit badges as proofs of his skill.

One of the merit badges he was pursuing was music and he was gathering material concerning American folk music, and so was I. We decided to pool our researches and out of that bit of co-operation a tight friendship developed.

I GUESS I never realized that there was anything odd about Norman. I was too close then; but since he left Northwood I have been free from his personality and able to see how much he did live in the past.

Everything we had in common was linked to the past. I know now that while I sometimes shared in his interests, he never shared mine. We met in boy scouting studying folk music. In our latter teens we traded books of horror stories and had two favorite authors, Edgar Allan Poe and H. P. Lovecraft. Superstition and flowery writing, untrained voices and trail songs, it was an odd culture that we held in common.

I don't think such things are unusual likes for teenage boys. It only becomes strange if they never

get out of such a phase. I did get over it. Sure, I still like folk music and horror tales, but I like other subjects, other music, as well. I broadened.

Not so with Norman. He became more engrossed in those things than ever as he got older. He began to talk and write in an old style and he became a recluse, holing up in his late father's house, seldom venturing out as far as the yard. The last time I actually saw him he was pale and sickly and his long hair was uneven, obviously cut by his own hand. His only regular companion was a large German Shepherd dog named Heff, who followed him about constantly, protectly.

This was developing before his father's death, and perhaps seeing his son withdrawing into such a state was partly to blame for the heart attack. When his father died, Norman continued on in the same matter until almost two months ago, when he moved away from Northwood, taking his dog Heff and little else.

It was the eve of his twenty-seventh birthday and I sent him a gift of a razor and blades before he left. I had a neighborhood boy deliver it and asked him to report back to me on Norman's appearance. I was relieved to hear that he was in better shape than the last time I had seen him, having gained weight and had had his hair prop-

erly trimmed. I was informed that his clothing was new and stylish, and amazingly enough, he was moving because of a job he had taken in the milling town of Cardside. I was sad at his leaving, but feeling that I had seen an honest-to-God miracle.

Now I want to present the letters. You know some history of Norman, brief as it is, and you can see it showed disturbing signs. I told it so you could have all the facts before you decide how to judge these few letters. The first came not more than a week after he moved.

Dear Buddy,

I thank you again for the razor. It is a fine one and I had needed a new one badly. The one I had was the first one I ever had. Remember when we bought them. We didn't even have a single whisker. It's very nice to get a decent shave once more.

I am set up here in Cardside. I have a small cottage in a nice neighborhood and have made and lost a friend in this first week. I know you're probably amazed, because you think of me as a hermit at heart, but not at all; that's all behind me now. I'm becoming quite the life-of-the-party type. I even have a girlfriend and it is becoming serious, I believe. That happened in the first week too!

Anyway, I met this man named

Nathan Franks, who worked with a large manufactory here in Card-side. We hit it off at once. He's a great fan of mountain ballads. I don't think I'll ever be able to give up folk music as you did; they're in my blood, I guess. But Nathan isn't here now. His company moved to Ohio and I had met him during his last few days left here. I guess I don't have to tell you my feelings on these companies that are always moving employees around.

I have a new neighbor, too. He is very mysterious. Not to say I'm nosy, but I did peek out while his furniture was unloaded. He had the normal amount of chairs and such, but not one utility, such as a refrigerator, was ever delivered. He didn't have any mirrors either, which only proves he isn't egotistic, I suppose.

He arrived this afternoon and I went over to show him my friendliness. (I warned you, I'm a changed man.) Now, let me tell you something. You think it's a waste of time to be obsessed with horror stories as we used to be, but I think I've proved you wrong. I know you'll say it's pure coincidence, but what a coincidence! First I met Nathan, who liked folk music, and now I discover my new neighbor is a great fancier of the Werewolf legends. One thing you have to admit about me: I never *believed* any of it.

Let me tell you, this man believes every word about werewolves. I told him I believed that werewolf legends sprang out of ignorance of a disease in which the sufferer believed he was an animal, but he said, not at all. He said lycanthropia was only that—a disease—but a werewolf, a real werewolf was black magic.

He told me that it was myth that a werewolf would only change during the full moon. A werewolf who receives his power through heredity can change whenever it wishes. Only those people bitten, who don't die, change at the full moon and against their will. He attributed this to certain alchemy rules set down originally by some warlock named Zutobar.

I know you're chuckling, but you wouldn't have laughed if you could have seen him telling it, his eyes wide and dramatic and his voice a mere hiss. He should write.

Yours,
Norm

THAT WAS THE first letter. I thought it was a joke, though I had never known Norman to have much of a sense of humor. Nothing in the letter sounded like the Norman I had known, the quick making of friends, the scoffing at superstition, the neighborliness, none of it was characteristic of Norman. I decided joke or no joke, it was a turn for the better.

Then this week I got these two letters. One arrived a day ahead of the other.

Dear Buddy,

I must tell you something. God, this might well be the last you ever hear from me. God, God, why didn't I stay in Northwood where I belonged. Oh, Buddy, never change your habits. It's the worst bad luck. Listen. I got very friendly with Mister Groff, the man I told you about in my last letter. He fascinated me with his continuous story about werewolves. I believed he must have known every tale or rumor of werewolves that was ever breathed, and he could tell them with an honesty that was frightening. It was hypnotic listening to him.

I grew curious about how he obtained so much first-hand information, especially since he swore it was all true. Then I took notice of the strange habits of my neighbor.

Little things that most people would have overlooked. Indeed, Buddy, you would have. You'd have been too busy scoffing at Mister Groff to ever see the reality. Little things like mirrors being forbidden in his home. The absence of any food storage. His eating habit, itself.

I invited him to supper several times and he always refused, saying he was on a very special diet.

I offered to obtain whatever it was that he was limited to eating, but he chuckled and said it was too much trouble, and he would never tell me what his diet was.

That was when I began to suspect and I took a very careful look at his features, and what I saw. He's a short, stocky man of animal quickness, with smooth flowing muscles. He has large round gray eyes, ears that come to sharp points at the upper tips and a nose that's long and straight. And, Buddy, there was a purple tint to his gums. His teeth were yellowed and he had two oversized canines. His tongue is thin and flat. Do you see the connections? They're so obvious.

Another thing, I guess the thing that convinced me, was the reaction of Heff. Heff wouldn't go near Mister Groff, in fact, wouldn't even go near his yard. Whenever I walked the dog, he tugged me across the street away from Groff's property. Many nights Heff would suddenly get up from my feet and howl toward the house across the drive. The dog knew, because he was an animal. God, Buddy, how much I knew, too.

One night, I was in bed, not able to sleep, because of Heff's howling. He carried on something terrible that night, baying like a lost soul. About midnight I could make out an answering cry coming from Mister Groff's backyard.

A long, pitiful bark that rose higher and higher in pitch.

I got up from bed and raised the blind. In the moonlight I could see a large animal sitting on its haunches in Groff's lane. It was a wolf. A werewolf, I knew. I ran to the kitchen where I kept a shotgun, but I remembered the legends before I got there. Even Mister Groff had mentioned silver weapons during his stories. Hell, Buddy, who has silver bullets? I didn't think. I just grabbed the only silver weapon I could think of, a fork from my silverware. I didn't even take the time to search for a knife.

When I got outside I saw a horrible scene. The wolf had trapped a woman against the house. Coming around the house were two policemen, probably attracted by the woman's screams or perhaps neighbors had called, complaining about the howling. One fired at the wolf, but of course, it didn't do any harm. The officer thought he had missed.

I didn't wait any longer. I ran across my lawn, leaped the low hedge and came down on top of the wolf, stabbing the fork deep into the chest. It reared and threw me back against the hard macadam driveway, slashing at my arm somehow as it did.

It probably would have been my end right then, if Heff hadn't suddenly leaped over the hedge

and attacked the wounded beast. They growled and tumbled about, Heff greatly outweighed and fighting a supernatural enemy. But my fork must have done the damage, for the beast slumped and fell dead.

One of the policemen took the woman away; she was unharmed. The other helped me up and took a look at my dog. Heff was scratched, but not seriously hurt and I promised to take him for a rabies examination the next morning. When the policeman inquired about the wolf I told him nothing and I explained that my neighbor was probably not at home. Then I volunteered to bury the beast because I had to know for sure.

I placed the carcass in my basement and the next morning when I came down I found Mister Groff, dead, with my fork stuck in his chest near the heart!

Now, Buddy, comes the worst part. The full moon is here. It was up last night and will still be full tonight. I have made a pact with myself, Bud, and if what I fear is true, then this will be my last letter to you. Let me explain.

There were three brutal murders last evening. The police describe the victims as torn apart as if by a large savage beast. One of the victims lingered long enough to describe his attacker. He pictured a large and hunched man, covered with coarse brown hair and he said the man had

torn at his throat with dog-like teeth.

I believe I am the killer. The scratch on my arm: I think Groff bit me when I stabbed him. Heaven help me, Buddy, I think I'm some kind of werewolf. If I am, I am determined that I shall not live to kill anyone else. I am locking myself in my house after posting this letter and staying in front of a mirror. If my image begins to alter I will not hesitate long enough for it to gain control. I have a pistol and a very special expensive bullet. If I am, Bud, I am going to kill myself.

Sorry,
Norm

I WAS UPSET by all this, but I didn't know what to do. I still thought the letters a joke. There had been nothing in any newspaper about any wolves in Cardside and I had not heard about the murders there, although I have since. It was such an unbelievable story. Werewolves, silver bullets, hunched psychopaths that bit throats. I was going to send him a letter suggesting that he shouldn't even give an image in the mirror.

Here, then. I got this letter the next day — yesterday. It had some blood upon the envelope. Norman was found dead, perhaps you knew, badly chewed up. He was found lying over the curb not far

from a mailbox in Cardside. He had a pistol with one chamber fired upon his person, but he hadn't died from any bullet-wounds, self-afflicted or otherwise. I think you'll find the explanation in this, the last letter from Norman Underwood.

Buddy,

It is like a nightmare here. My worst fears are not realized, but it is nearly as bad. I have sat here self-consciously staring at myself in a large mirror for an entire evening; watching for a patch of hair to grow. I have waited, but nothing happened. I was convinced, with great relief, that I was not a monster. I relaxed and set my pistol down on the table for a moment.

I heard a sound in the house, a shuffling sound, like heavy, tired feet, coming steadily toward my room. It paused in the next chamber. I got up, taking my pistol with me, and opened my door. The other room caught the full light of the moon. Standing in the pale white was the man, hunched over and darkly naked, his body matted with coarse brown hair.

He came at me, growling, viciously alert. I have never seen anyone move so quickly in my life. I had barely enough time to get one shot off from my pistol and luckily I hit someplace vital. The man gave a yelp of pain, but

he didn't fall yet. He grabbed me and threw me against the wall. His claw-like hands slashed at me, ripping my flesh off my face and trying to get into my neck. He would have torn me to shreds, but the bullet I had fired caught up with him. He slipped to his knees and fell over, whining, on to my rug.

He is still alive, even while I am writing this, but I think he is dying. I think I am dying too. I'm dying, Buddy. And listen, if

I can mail this, if you get this, you must know. I recognized the man, Bud. I knew who he was. By God, I knew who he was.

Norm

That's it. Norman is being brought to Northwood for burial. There isn't anything else to tell you. Oh, I guess you heard they found his dog, Heff, dead. Shot through the throat with a silver bullet.

The Reckoning

The first ballot we received on the Fall issue came from a reader who had never read the story, *Leininger Versus The Ants* (we hadn't either), and rated Alter's *A Sense of Crawling* tops. And, in general, those who had not read the Stephenson tale liked this story better than those who had. Thereafter, Rousseau took first place until just about mid-point, where the winning story tied with *Amen-Ra*, and then moved on to undisputed supremacy. Here, then, is how the Fall issue finally came out:

(1) "*Williamson*", by Henry S. Whitehead; (2) *The Curse of Amena-Ra*, by Victor Rousseau; (3) *A Sense of Crawling*, by Robert Edmond Alter; (4) *The Spell of the Sword*, by Frank Aubrey, (5) *Dermod's Bane*, by Robert E. Howard; (6) *The Laughing Duke*, by Wallace West.

Alter drew some dislike, as we suggested above, but received more "outstanding" votes than did Rousseau and Whitehead, who also drew the special plaudits. Howard and West drew a little dislike, too, but more first or second place votes, and most of those who put the tale of the laughing Duke toward the end assured us of their pleasure in reading it nonetheless. In general, this issue seems to have been well-liked.

The Jewels Of

Vishnu

by Harriet Bennett

Introduction

by Sam Moskowitz

VISHNU IS A name frequently encountered in tales of Old India, particularly those that retain some element of the supernatural. To the majority of readers, Vishnu is merely a romantic-sounding title, eminently suitable to enhancing the

aura of mystery and the unknown that an author may intend to convey. They rarely are aware that Vishnu is much more than the invention of an author or a name plucked from some hazy mythology.

Vishnu is actually the second

most powerful individual, person, or god of the three elements which form the bulwark of "modern" Hinduism. Hinduism embraces a group of sacred books, based on old mythology, which were the contribution of the Brahmans. For a time, the incursion of Buddhism into what is now India, between 500 B.C. to A.D. 500, threatened to supplant Hindu teachings. The older religion was modernized into a more acceptable format by the appearance of three great books, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and *Laws of Manu*.

From these evolved the Hindu trinity as follows:

1. *Brahma*: the ultimate being, creator and pervading life force.

2. *Vishnu*: the preserver of all things good, material and immaterial; a protector.

3. *Siva*: the destroying vengeful force.

Those who practice Hinduism today understand Vishnu and Siva much more clearly than they do the concept of Brahma. Due to the influence of

the British, and the incursion of the outside world, Hinduism has lost ground; however, Vishnu and Siva are still regarded with appropriate religious awe, while ironically the the image of the creator, Brahma, is losing ground.

In this perspective we see that Vishnu is actually the number one member of the Hindu trinity, so far as the reverence of the adherents are concerned. That there are cities, temples, and treasures in existence, guarded by the great protector, Vishnu, is a very easy thing for the Hindu to believe.

The theme of the decline in power of a God in direct ratio to the loss of belief of its followers is a common one in fiction. *The Jewels of Vishnu*, by Harriet Bennett first appeared in *THE STRAND MAGAZINE* for January, 1904, and deserves a prominent place in the considerable list of such tales that have been written in the past, because of the clarity with which it focuses upon the powers and meaning of the Hindu Vishnu.



"IT LIES yonder, sahib." I shaded my eyes with my hand and saw far away, guarded upon

either side by a mighty peak, a peculiar rounded summit.

Outlined against the setting sun,

glorified by a golden halo, the mountain reared itself against the horizon—a mysterious purple shadow upon a background of unimaginable splendor.

The Ghoorka at my elbow spoke again.

"The glory of Vishnu is upon his temple; it rests secure shielded by his might. Yet shall mortals once again enter the sacred halls and behold the treasure that is therein."

The man fell back and joined his fellows. My companion, Roger Hellis, glanced at me and smiled. Yet the speaker's earnestness had so far convinced us that we had—but half-seriously, it is true—embarked upon our present adventure at his instigation.

Jhelam Khan had entered our service at Parma. A silent, steady, capable man we found him, until our wanderings led us into the wilder regions of the Himalayas that lie south of the Sangpo. Here his demeanor underwent a change. He became restless and excited, and so strange in his manner altogether that when one evening he solemnly requested an audience we concluded he was about to reveal some unspeakable crime.

Hellis undertook to hear his confession. At the close of a lengthy conversation he returned to me, laughing.

"We are in for a good thing, old man. Our friend here under-

takes to make our fortunes. He guides us to a concealed treasure, in magnitude surpassing the wildest dreams of avarice; we help ourselves and come away. There is nothing to pay."

"And the reason of this seemingly disinterested act of benevolence?"

"Does not appear at present. I fancy religious prejudice stands in the way of his acting alone, or with his compatriots here. We commit the act of sacrilege—sacrilege it is—and incur the wrath of the outraged god. Our guide will do us the favor of accepting a percentage upon the profits of the venture at a safe distance from the scene of the crime."

"The old story of the Temple of Vishnu, I suppose?"

"Just so. You remember the legend?"

"I have heard it. A temple hallowed out of a mountain, or adapted from a natural cavern, by an extinct race. A golden throne. An image of Vishnu, garlanded with immortal flowers, and crowned with the wondrous jewel that gives to its possessor knowledge of all created things. When do we start?"

Hellis laughed.

"This very hour, if Jhelam had his way. You never saw a chap in such a condition of mingled fear and avarice. Here Jhelam!"

The Ghoorka, who had been watching us, advanced quickly.

"What do you call your mountain?"

"Shulta, sahib."

"How long will it take us to get there from here?"

"Three days, sahib. The way is difficult, and no one knows it save I. It was shown to me in a dream; and he who revealed it mocked me, saying, 'The foot of the robber is upon the threshold. Yet shall no man wrong Vishnu.'"

"You have great faith in dreams," I put in, smiling.

The Ghoorka turned his head sharply and looked at me.

"By the path that was revealed to me I came to the temple, and beheld with these eyes the glory of Vishnu, and the might of the jewel that is upon his brow."

We were impressed in spite of ourselves. It was within the bounds of possibility that the remains of an ancient temple might exist in those unexplored regions. In any case it was an adventure ready to our hands; and half-amused, half-believing, we committed ourselves to the guidance of the impatient Jhelam.

FOR TWO DAYS we journeyed through ways difficult and dangerous enough to satisfy the most enthusiastic climber. The evening of the second day beheld us gazing down through a rugged pass upon the wild and desolate valley that,

marked the final stage of our adventure.

Above and around us towered a hundred mighty peaks, unchanged since the dawn of creation. Below, in the valley, tumbling rock and thunderous avalanche had wrought barrenness and devastation. Far away, at the head of the valley, rose the great dome of Shulta, softly veiling its snowy cupola, hung a silvery cloud. Soft and hazy as silken gauze, it concealed the apex, and delicately softened away, till the outline of the great dome was lost and the mountain seemed to be one with the mystery of the blue vault above.

"The mountain looks like a volcano," Hellis remarked to our guide. "Is that cloud always there?"

There was a look in Jhelam's eyes that I should have attributed to abject terror had not his courage been proved beyond all possibility of doubt.

"I know not what the cloud may be," he answered. "I saw it the last time that I came near to Shulta, golden, and shaped like the flower of the lotus. Vishnu is great." And the man shuddered in the sunshine.

The following morning we made an early start, Jhelam leading the way; his companions, wild, dark-skinned men of the mountains, bringing up the rear. Once in the valley we followed the course of

the stream, and late in the afternoon commenced the ascent of Shulta.

The slope at first was gentle, but the ground was exceedingly rough and broken. From its formation I judged that at some distant period it had been the scene of a gigantic landslide. As we toiled upward the gradually increasing roar of falling water fell upon our ears, and presently surmounting a great crag we came upon a dark pool, into whose waters the stream fell down the face of a perpendicular rock from an orifice some two hundred feet above us.

"The entrance to the temple of Vishnu lies there," Jhelam said, raising his arm and pointing to the head of the waterfall.

"If the architect could have contrived a flight of steps it would have been a convenience," I remarked. "Are the worshippers of Vishnu birds or monkeys?"

Jhelam looked at me with marked disapproval.

"They who worshipped in the halls of Shulta have long passed away; the valley and Shulta herself are changed since then. But change and decay come not to the temple wherein Vishnu sits enthroned."

As he spoke he turned from the waterfall, and following him we came to a spot where the smooth surface of the rock was jagged and broken, forming a rude ladder.

Here we ordered the two bearers to wait, and, still following Jhelam's lead, clambered up the face of the rock until we reached a sort of shelf or irregular pathway. Along this we cautiously made our way, and presently found ourselves standing at the mouth of the tunnel whence the stream issued.

Here Jhelam stopped and faced us, his eyes fierce and glittering.

"Behold, sahibs, the door of the Temple of Vishnu. For the way that I have revealed, for the treasure that I have given into your hands, I claim a price."

"We have only your word for the treasure as yet," Hellis answered, irritable with suppressed excitement. "If we find anything that is worth the trouble of bringing away, you shall have your share, of course."

Jhelam's lips were white and he trembled as he spoke, but his eyes were steady.

"When the sahibs turn again to the South, and the valley and Shulta are far away, then the sahibs will give into the hands of their servant the necklace that is about the throat of Vishnu?"

"All right," Hellis answered, cheerfully. "For that matter, you may as well take it yourself."

Jhelam shuddered.

"Vishnu is great—he knows that I am but a servant," he answered, piously. "Only, if it be the will of the sahibs, it is fitting that I take

what they shall be pleased to give me."

"I trust Vishnu will be so obliging as to take into consideration the obvious propriety of such a course," Hellis answered, gravely. "And now, Jhelam, have the goodness to introduce us."

THE STREAM had worn for itself a deep bed within the rock, and we had little difficulty in following our guide as he clambered along the sides. Emerging from some twenty feet of tunnel we found ourselves standing upon a rocky platform within a rounded cavern, from whose damp sides and roof the water trickled into a deep pool.

By the faint twilight that pervaded this chamber I saw that it was small, and in color of a deep, intense blue. The pool, still and clear as a mirror, reflected the soft light, giving to the beholder in some strange fashion a sense of infinite space. Gazing downward into the pool I grew confused, for it seemed not water but sky. Within its depths I saw stars flash and twinkle, and from side to side across the hazy purple traced the soft band of light we call the Milky Way.

For some moments I gazed confusedly — unable to determine whether I was looking downward or up. At length, raising my eyes to the roof, I beheld the explanation of the mystery. High above me

some points of glittering ore caught the golden light that issued from an opening at the farther end of the cavern, and it was their reflection that turned the still water into a starry sky. I smiled. But when I gazed into the pool again the illusion held.

I was startled out of these visions by a shout from Hellis, who had followed Jhelam through the opening, and, hastening after him, I, too, uttered a cry of amazement.

We had emerged from the twilight of the smaller cavern into a hall of such gigantic dimensions that the eye, failing to comprehend its vastness, was conscious only of a vivid central light, fading at immense distances into impenetrable shadow. Above us and, as it seemed, in the center of the cave a rift in the dome poured from a vast height a shaft of golden light upon a raised dais, whereon, crowned and robed in unsurpassable splendor, was seated a colossal image of Vishnu.

Awed, fearful, half believing that we dreamed, we made our way towards it and slowly grasped the wonder of the amazing thing.

JHELAM HAD not lied. Here, hidden from the eyes of man, was a treasure which the whole world could not surpass.

The idol rested upon a throne of pure gold, and seated muesured from head to heel fully thirty feet.

It appeared to be carved out of some hard, close-grained wood, and was enamelled in colors, blue predominating. The hem and pattern of the robe that partially draped the figure were traced in gleaming gems; the arms and ankles bore an immense number of jewelled rings. Upon the great blue throat glittered a necklace composed of ropes and pendants of magnificent stones, each one a fortune itself alone. In its left hand the idol bore the sacred shell; the right grasped a mace. From its waist, suspended by a golden chain, hung a dagger, the sheath and handle one mass of diamonds and emeralds. The head was encircled by a plain gold band, in the center of which, upon the forehead of the god, rested the sacred stone that legend said had never been defiled by the hand of man.

Never in our wildest dreams had we pictured such a wealth of gold and jewels; yet the strangest thing of all has yet to be told.

From top to toe the image was wreathed about with living garlands of lotus-blossoms of a vivid blue, as fresh as if they had been gathered in that self-same hour.

"There must be priests somewhere in these caves who attend upon the idol," I whispered to Hellis.

"Yes," Hellis answered, slowly.

"But lotus-flowers—*blue* lotus-flowers—in this place!"

"I thought the blue lotus was entirely legendary."

"So did I," Hellis admitted. And we relapsed into silence.

The god, majestic and serene, gazed smiling into space. Its vastness and its beauty shamed our mission. The one sensation we were conscious of when we recovered from our first shock of astonishment was an overwhelming repugnance to lay sacrilegious hands upon this vast unguarded treasure—in plain English, we were afraid of the thing. There was something so uncanny in its strange surroundings, so incomprehensible in its untarnished freshness.

I do not know how long we stood there. Jhelam had disappeared after showing us the entrance, and we had entered alone. We were startled by a sound within the silent cave, and turning saw the two bearers, who had been ordered to await our return, close to us and staring at the idol.

We expressed ourselves warmly, but we might as well have held our tongues. The men had neither eyes nor ears for us. They jabbered and gesticulated in a frenzy of excitement, and, mounting upon the dais, climbed over the idol, examining its jewels and trying the settings with their knives.

Hellis watched them with a frown upon his face.

"Leave them alone," he said, when I would have interfered. "It

is nothing to us; I shall not touch the thing, and if you are wise you won't either. I have a feeling that no good will come of it."

To this day I cannot account for it, but the same conviction was so strong upon me that I viewed the very natural behavior of the two men with positive repulsion.

One of them had scrambled up on to the knees of the idol, and was hacking at the necklace, whilst his companion strove to sever the chain that secured the priceless dagger. I watched them with feelings most strangely mixed. One half of me dubbed myself and my friend a couple of superstitious fools; the other half experienced horror, fear, and repulsion, as at the sight of nameless sacrilege.

Another instant and the necklace slipped from its resting-place and fell to the ground with a rattle and a thud. Hellis put his hand through my arm.

"Come away," he said. "We have been here long enough. I am beginning to have fancies."

We went out of the cave quickly; for I had seen the face of the god, and I was beginning to have fancies too.

At the entrance we turned and glanced back. The shaft of refulgent light beat down upon the golden throne, the bejewelled image scintillated sparks of variegated color.

A lithe dark form, balancing it-

self upon the uplifted arm of the god, strove with knife and fingers to loosen from its setting the sacred stone. I heard a cry, saw the jewel fall, and in the same instant the light went out.

Hellis and I said to each other afterwards that the same thing must happen every afternoon when the sun sank below a certain point in the heavens; but at the moment when it occurred we did not stay to reason. Somehow we got through the small cavern without falling into the water and, guided by the sunlight that shone through the opening of the tunnel, made our way into the outer world.

JHELAM WAS waiting for us, an angry protest upon his lips; but we paid no heed to him. Pausing at the end of the tunnel, we shouted again and again to the men within the cave; for it seemed likely that without some sound to guide them they would never again find their way into the light of day.

It must have been twenty minutes before we heard an answering shout, and one of the men came into sight at the other end of the tunnel, slipping and staggering from side to side, overweighted, as it seemed, by the wealth of gold and jewels he was carrying. Presently he emerged into the light, and I saw that something was wrong.

In some strange freak he had wound about him a long garland

of the blue lotus. The flowers exhaled a powerful and most peculiar odour, which seemed to wither their victim. The poor wretch's face was ghastly; the lips and eyeballs blue as the flowers that rested upon his breast. I called him to throw off the garland, and he tried to raise his stiffening arms. But in the effort, or overcome by sudden giddiness, he swayed, lost his balance, and pitching head foremost over the precipice, dropped like a stone into the pool below. I saw the dark water close over his feet; and not a ripple, not a bubble, rose up from the spot where he had disappeared. It was as if the earth beneath the water had opened and swallowed him up.

We watched and waited, and at last turned away. The second bearer stood at my elbow. The jewelled dagger of the outraged god, long as a man's sword, was in his hand; the mass of jewels that had adorned its throat hung over his shoulder. He had seized what first came to hand in the darkness and got away; and I judged from the look in his face that the hidden wealth of all the ages would not tempt him to re-enter the cavern.

The same idea possessed us all. We wanted to put as much space between ourselves and the mountain as was possible before night-fall. Hellis and I in a hurried consultation decided to leave behind

us such portion of the baggage as it was now with our reduced numbers, impossible to carry, and to set out at once for the spot where we had encamped the previous night.

As we were re-arranging the baggage, Hellis directed my attention to Jhelam and his companion, who appeared to be debating how best to carry the weighty necklace. Presently Jhelam, much the stronger man of the two, seized the ornament, and rolling it up in his bundle, swung the heavy weight upon his shoulder and prepared to start. The other scowled at him savagely, but said nothing, and a moment later we started off.

We were still some distance from the spot where we had decided to camp out when night fell upon the valley, and compelled us unwillingly to call a halt.

The night was dark and we were very tired. The last thing I remember noticing before I dropped off into a deep sleep was the two men stretched amicably side by side, their heads upon the bundles which enclosed the jewels.

I SLEPT HEAVILY, and awoke suddenly to a consciousness of catastrophe. Day was breaking, and in the gray light I saw Hellis and Jhelam bending over something that lay stark and motionless between them.

It was the body of the bearer,

but lately dead. The form was contorted, and upon the face there was an expression of unutterable fear and horror. Over the heart was a great gaping wound. The bundle lay open, its contents scattered around. The dagger was gone.

Hellis and I looked at each other in horror, and than at Jhelam.

The man, with a ghastly face, raised his arms to the sky and solemnly swore his innocence. Paying no heed to his words, we searched every piece of baggage wherein it was possible for him to have secreted the dagger, but unavailingly. And all the time, with gray face and shaking limbs, he entreated us to waste no time, but to rise and flee from that accursed place.

"Let us get on," Hellis said, at last. "The man is too cunning for us. He has buried the thing somewhere, and by-and-by he will give us the slip and come back after it. We can't hang him. We must suffer his company for another day."

We buried the murdered man, and left him to rest in that lonely valley. Of all the wealth that had been torn from the god only the necklace remained, and that Jhelam guarded with a growing fear.

That night we encamped upon the mountains. Hellis and I kept close together, and Jhelam, who

had hardly strayed a yard from us all day, wrapped himself in his blanket with the necklace clasped to his breast, and under cover of the darkness rolled himself close to our feet.

We awoke suddenly and at the same moment. Again it was gray dawn, and a ruddy flush yet rested upon the mountain peaks. We sat up and looked at each other and then around with a feeling that something awful had happened. Another glance and, with a loud cry, Hellis was upon his feet. My eyes followed the direction of his, but I uttered no cry. I was smitten dumb.

At our feet, with distorted face and staring eyeballs, lay the body of Jhelam, still warm. His throat, swollen and lacerated, bore the marks of a dozen jagged wounds. He had been strangled. But with what? No cord that was ever twisted could have inflicted injuries so needlessly cruel. The blanket in which the man had been wrapped was spread open upon the ground. The necklace of the god had disappeared.

Hellis, his tanned face an unnatural hue, looked up at me across the body of the dead man.

"We wronged the poor wretch," he whispered, under his breath. "The other murder was not his work. There were priests in the temple, as you supposed, and they have followed us as the Thugs fol-

lowed their victims. If we sleep in the open again tonight it will be for the last time."

I made no reply. The manner of these successive murders stupefied me. Such vengeance was inhuman in its slow achievement, appalling in its relentless cruelty.

Poor Jhelam had but scant burial rites. Our only safety lay in flight, and we started without delay. Our way through those unknown mountain regions had been dangerous enough with Jhelam, courageous and determined, for our guide; alone, spite of desperate effort, we made but slow progress. Soon—miraculously soon, it seemed—the sun sank down in the heavens, and the rapidly failing light forced us to halt many miles short of the mountain village from which we had set out upon our ill-omened quest.

WE RESTED that last night upon a plateau which commanded the most magnificent panorama that it has ever been my lot to look upon. Near at hand a mighty chasm separated the spot upon which we stood from the well-nigh perpendicular wall of rock that formed the base of a neighboring mountain. Far as the eye could reach peak beyond peak darkened in the shadow of coming night. Alone, cut off as we were from all humanity, it seemed a fitting spot

in which to await a terrible and mysterious death.

How and from whence the enemy might come we could not conjecture. We could but lie awake and watch, trusting to our sharpened senses to detect the presence that achieved its end with such stealthy certainty. We were unpacking our scanty supply of provisions, when there fell out from the basket a small packet wrapped in dirty rags.

I unrolled it; wondering what treasured amulet had been thus strangely left to our keeping. Another second and the wraps fell away, and in my hand lay the sacred stone of Vishnu!

The dismay in my face was reflected in Hellis's.

"Pitch the thing over the precipice," he cried; "we have had enough of their sacred jewels."

"Don't be in a hurry," I answered. "It seems to me that here is a chance of treating with our pursuers. Vengeance will count for little with these priests of Vishnu, compared with their desire to regain possession of this sacred object. While we hold the jewel over some thousands of feet of space we are practically safe."

"I don't know," Hellis answered, slowly. "There is something about the whole affair that I don't understand. I am not superstitious; but strange things do happen sometimes to people who interfere with

these Indian idols. Did you notice anything peculiar about the faces of those three men—the one when he was smitten, the other two when they lay dead?"

"You mean the circular mark, like a burn. It was odd that they all had it. The priests' mark, I suppose."

"No priest touched the first man."

"Are you sure he had the mark?"

"Absolutely. Jhelam saw it as well as I. When I noticed the same mark upon the forehead of the second corpse, I asked him what it meant; and he said . . ."

"Well?"

"It is the seal of Vishnu."

"You think Vishnu is pursuing us in person?" I said, wondering what Hellis meant and whether he was serious.

"I think there is something incomprehensible about the whole affair; and with the remembrance of those three dead men, and the manner of their deaths, still fresh in my memory, I don't feel that lively contempt for the religion of another race that I have in common with other well-conducted people when I am safe in my own country. Throw the thing away, Jack."

But the stone fascinated me. I had a feeling that if I looked at it long I should begin to see visions. If we were attacked I would offer

it in exchange for our lives. If we passed the night in safety I meant to keep it.

It is not an easy thing, after a day of great physical exertion, to lie awake all night with the senses strained to their utmost capacity. The thick darkness, the unutterable silence, weighed upon me with ever-increasing heaviness; and at last, unwittingly, I slept.

I was roused by a hand upon my shoulder, a voice in my ear.

"Wake!" Hellis cried. "Wake and rise; for, by my soul, Vishnu is upon us!"

With all my senses about me I leapt to my feet and, gazing towards the East, beheld the coming of the god.

THE NIGHT WAS at the point when the swift advance of coming day makes itself felt rather than seen; but something stirred the dying shadows that was not of the earth, nor of the heavens that encompass her.

All around there was a faint monotonous sound and motion, as of myriads of infinitesimal insects filling space with the quivering of tiny wings; but above this strange whirring, and distinct from it rose, at an inconceivable distance, the roar of wind—of wind gathering in its force and velocity, more awful far in its growing meaning. For as it swept nearer it grew into a hurricane, and the mad fury of it, the

wild roar and rush, its sweep and eddy and thunderous crash, became as the sound of mighty instruments; till at last, gathering measure and harmony in its advance, it swelled as it swept over us into a grand and majestic chant. Then a line of burning crimson flushed the horizon, and upward, in slow splendor, rose the sun. At the moment that the awakening world flamed in its glory, the fiery ball gave forth a shaping mass of incandescence that hung for a second upon its edge like a planet emerging from occultation, then floated earthwards.

Smitten helpless, speechless, I awaited its coming like an image of stone. It seemed that radiant thing was close upon me, when I was vaguely conscious of a voice in my ear, a hand upon my arm; and something was snatched from me and hurled into space.

A quivering shaft of iridescent light flashed downward into the shadowy chasm. There was a roar that was like the rending of the universe, a revelation of light and

color too glorious to be borne, and oblivion blotted out the dreadful vision.

Hellis asserts now that he saw nothing and said nothing upon that memorable morning. He also tries to convince me that I had the nightmare, followed by a kind of fit. He admits, however, that the earthquake affected his nerves, and that, finding the sacred stone clasped in my hand as I lay insensible, he took advantage of the opportunity to get rid of what he considered a compromising piece of property.

I dare say it is all true. It sounds probable.

Yet sometimes I seem to see, as in a vision, that lonely valley changed and riven by an upheaval that has sealed the halls of Shulta forever against the entrance of man; and to behold within that silent temple, lighted alternately by flaming gold and gleaming silver, the dazzling image of Vishnu — jewelled as when we first beheld it, majestic and serene; crowned with knowledge and power, and wreathed about with immortality.



The Man From Cincinnati

by Holloway Horn

Quite a few people were interested in the legends that surrounded the Balcombe estate . . .

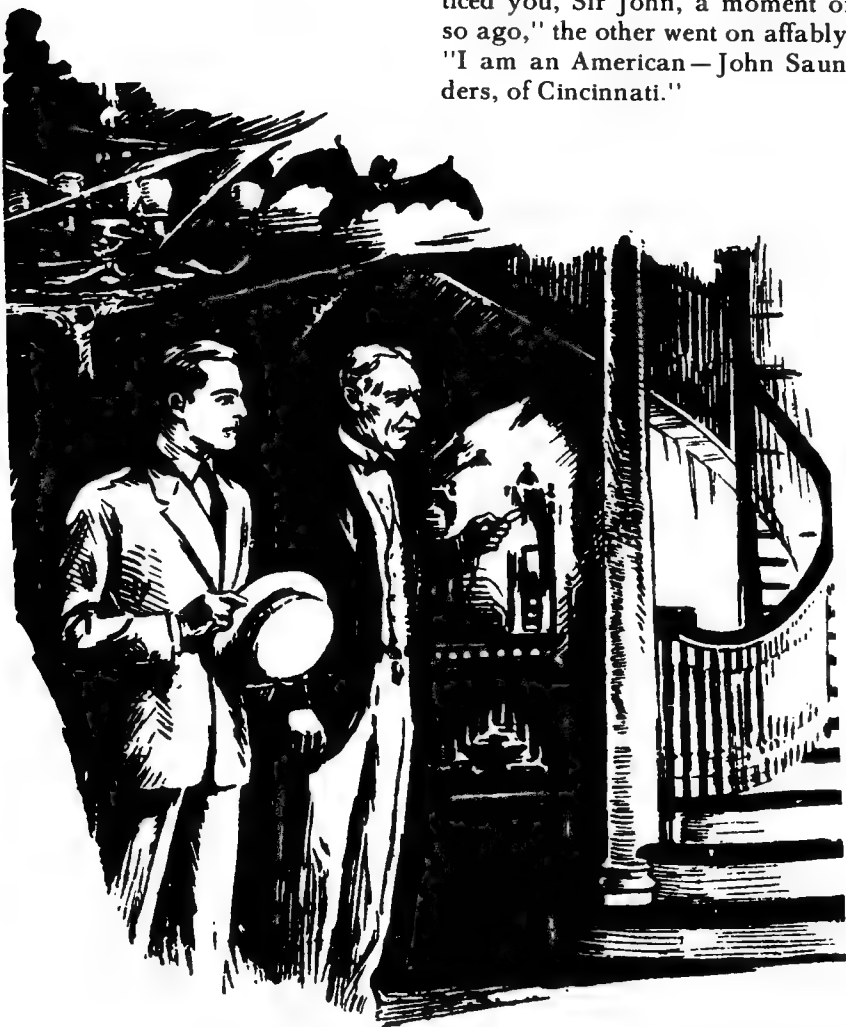
THE SETTING was perfect. In the foreground the branches of a cedar tree swept the velvet lawn; behind it, mellowed by the centuries, stood the Elizabethan mansion which had sheltered the Balcombes for generations.

The eleventh baronet slept peacefully in a swing chair in the cool shadow of the tree, his white head bowed down.

Suddenly he stirred in his sleep and opened his eyes with the consciousness that he was not alone. Blinking, and a little irritable, he sat upright and saw that a stranger was standing a few yards away from him, gravely contemplating the house.

Neither spoke for perhaps half a minute, when the stranger, observing that Sir John was awake, said,

ticed you, Sir John, a moment or so ago," the other went on affably. "I am an American—John Saunders, of Cincinnati."



"I trust I did not disturb you, sir?"

"Not at all," said the baronet courteously.

"As a matter of fact, I only no-

"Indeed?" Sir John replied, and sat upright.

"And I'm afraid I'm trespassing in your park," the American went on with a smile. "But I'm interest-

ed in Balcombe. Years ago my ancestors came from this part of England, you see."

"Saunders? The name is still about here," Sir John said. He was now wide awake and watching the stranger curiously. He had a vague feeling that he had seen him before.

"I was on my way to the Hall to ask permission to look over it," the American volunteered. He was entirely at his ease.

"Wednesday is usually the day," the baronet pointed out. "But I shall be happy to let you look round, seeing that you have come so far."

"Old mansions are fascinating, particularly to one from my part of the world, where most things are new, Sir John."

"You know my name?"

"Of course."

"You might as well sit down," said Sir John in a friendlier tone. The stranger had a pleasing manner and was quite unlike his idea of an American. His accent did not jar—indeed, it was rather attractive—and he seemed to be deeply interested in the old house. Somehow, the old man felt drawn to him.

"You were saying your ancestors lived in Balcombe?" Sir John asked.

"Yes. There's a gravestone in the churchyard I reckon to be that of my great-grandfather—Ephraim Saunders, of this parish."

"The vicar's a good fellow. He has all the parish records, and I'm sure he'd turn them up for you," the baronet suggested.

"Thank you," the American smiled. "If I have time, I will call on him."

"Personally, I haven't a great deal of use for the cloth," Sir John said confidentially. "I'm a materialist, I'm afraid. But they are part of the tradition down here."

"You surprise me, sir. I confess I've always associated the English landed gentry with the church."

"Even so—the trend of modern thought, I'm afraid, is to make one more critical than of old."

"Quite."

"But I'm keeping you talking, and you want to look at the Hall. Come along! I'll take you round myself. Jevons, the butler, usually gets it all mixed up, anyway."

"That's very good of you, sir. I shall be very much obliged."

HALFWAY UP the broad staircase, Sir John touched a secret panel and revealed with dramatic suddenness a long, narrow corridor ending in darkness. The American started.

"The haunted room!" laughed Sir John. "Shall we go down to it?"

"Sure!" Saunders replied. "I'll always try anything once."

The corridor led to an oak door, black with age, which opened

into a small, square, unfurnished room, conveying an immediate impression of eeriness.

"That's all there is to it," Sir John pointed out. "Legends galore, of course. Skeletons and whatnot, and clanking chains in the small hours. I'm always comfortably asleep by that time, however. Personally, I don't believe a word of it."

"If this room could speak . . ." the American said in a quiet voice, as if he had not heard what his host had said. "It's a strange thing, Sir John, but in my country, thousands of miles away from here, I'm almost certain that I have heard, from my own father, one of the legends of this very room."

"Is that so?" The baronet was obviously surprised.

"Some distant ancestor of mine had a daughter, and she is supposed to have been held prisoner in a secret room in this house."

"By one of *my* ruffianly ancestors?" Sir John asked with a frankly incredulous smile. "Do you mean that you—a modern American from Cincinnati!—claim a share in my ghost?"

Saunders smiled. "You evidently don't attach any importance to the legend at all, Sir John."

"Not a penny's worth! This room is rather stuffy, don't you think? Come—I'll show you some of the pictures. There are legends clustering around some of them, of course."

By the time Sir John Balcombe and the citizen of Cincinnati emerged from the impressive dimness of the Elizabethan hall into the garish sunlight of the lawn, there was an understanding between them. Sir John *liked* the American. There was a freshness about him, a naivete. He appeared to be far more impressed with the legends of the Hall than was its owner.

"It's one of the loveliest places I've seen, Sir John," he said enthusiastically.

"You'd like to take it to America? I've read that it's sometimes done," his host said with a laugh.

The American shook his head. "You can't move a home, Sir John. It doesn't consist merely of bricks and mortar. Besides, what would your ghost do? I really cannot imagine an English one happy in—say—Cincinnati!"

"*Our* ghost!" Sir John corrected him. "But, as a matter of fact, if one attaches any importance to the legends, there are many ghosts at Balcombe."

"Oh? I'm terribly interested—I'm afraid you're not?"

"Frankly, I'm not. I'm a materialist, as I told you. I don't think there's a word of truth in any of the stories. Curiously enough, my wife does. I'm sorry she's not in; I'm sure she would have told you about them and, moreover, enjoyed doing so. One of the stories, even

more absurd than the others, is to the effect that a certain ghost appears to the head of the house before he dies. It is like a thousand similar places, but our specimen has one peculiarity. The ghost never appears in the same guise twice. And always it is what one might call a contemporary ghost. As I told you, I think the whole story is so much moonshine."

"It is a pity you are a materialist; these legends are simply wasted on you!"

SIR JOHN smiled indulgently. The American was really a pleasant fellow. He appeared to have the credulous innocence of a child, and to be unlike everything Sir John had ever read of his race.

"It's a pity my wife isn't here," Sir John said again. "She knows the whole story. Once, I remember, the ghost was a postilion—that would be before the railways, of course. And another time it took the form of a white-haired lawyer. That was in my grandfather's days. The old gentleman—my grandfather, I mean, not the lawyer—told them in his deathbed that the lawyer had been with him all the afternoon. What had happened, of course, was that my grandfather had dreamed about the lawyer. But it was enough for the credulous people to seize on it and say: 'There you are! The ghost!' And that night he died. It

is obvious, of course, that he would have died anyway."

"No one else saw the lawyer?" the American asked.

"No. But, if people want to believe in a ghost, a detail like that doesn't stop them."

"It's hardly fair on the ghost for you to tell his story," the American said, with a smile. "You don't give him a chance, Sir John. You could have made the story sound far more convincing."

"I told you I thought it all moonshine. When it appears to me, I'll believe it. I'm not prejudiced, really; but, until something happens which I, personally, can test, I'm afraid I'm an unbeliever."

"And you have never seen it?"

"No. I've heard all sorts of queer noises in the house at night, but you can't live in a place like this without noises. I'm quite certain that every one of them admits of some simple, natural explanation."

"It's a lovely old place," the American said quietly. He looked up at the mellow red front, the quaint windows. Perhaps he was envious, for he seemed almost to sigh as he turned to his host. "And now I must be going, Sir John. I thank you for your kindness in receiving me. I shall take away the happiest memories of Balcombe."

"Not at all. Good-by—good-by!"

An hour later, Lady Balcombe,

dignified and austere, returned from a round of visits.

Jevons, the butler, stood within the shadow of the hall, as she entered. He had been with the family for forty years.

"My lady!" he said as his mistress came up the broad steps.

"Yes, Jevons?"

"You will forgive me—but Sir John has not been himself this afternoon."

"What do you mean, Jevons?" she asked in surprise.

"He's been acting very queer,

my lady. Walking all over the house talking to himself."

Lady Balcombe glanced sharply at the butler, but remained silent.

"He was talking just as if there was someone with him, my lady."


"And he was alone?" she asked in her quiet voice.

"Yes."

She breathed deeply.

"Where is your master? I will go to him."

They found Sir John where he would have wished to be found—underneath the old cedar tree, sheltered from the sun.



You'd never have thought you'd find a story like this in the pages of one of the leading science fiction magazines, would you? Yet, there it was, and it wasn't until two issues later that the new publishers were satisfied that readers did not want straight weird tales in a science fiction magazine. But that same issue of *ASTOUNDING STORIES* ran a delightful Jules Verne type romance by Wallace West—*Plane People*. And a number of the active readers have urged us to reprint this tale in *FAMOUS SCIENCE FICTION*. We have happily responded to this suggestion, and you will find that story in the 5th issue of *FAMOUS SCIENCE FICTION*, now on sale. If your newsstand isn't covered, let not your heart be troubled; the remedy lies on page 125.

Ground Afire

by Anna Hunger

(author of *Beyond the Breakers*, *Dwelling of the Righteous*)

"Ground Afire" . . . the old Indian name, lowest point in the United States . . . no visitors after May. Searing heat dangerous . . . desert . . . dry lakes of sand, dunes, great mountains. And Thea knew that it was here that she wanted to go, with Evan, even though she wondered why . . .

THE WINDS OF the Adriatic were blowing softly across the Lido beaches at Venice. Slowly Thea walked past the men seated having coffee on the terrace of the great hotel. She forced herself to continue walking with deliberation although some of their words came to her clearly. The stories about her were ten years old—why should she care? Listening, a sly smile crossed her lips.

"There are certain women who devour men. Even the men they love."

"It's the ancient rivalry between sexes."

"Is any woman worth such a contest?"

"A few."

"But only a weak man would allow himself to be beaten down—and destroyed."

"Her men were both highly suc-

cessful, even outstanding. Not weak."

"We'll never know the answer."

Like glass the water; the sky glassy bright. She looked up and across the water. Broken pieces of glass with black lacquered gondolas passing through, with the sleek motorboats, the square station boats, the old freight barges passing.

The sound of a little fire is like water and the sound of a little stream is like fire, she mused. Shall I buy the silk dress, or the necklace? Evan will make me a gift of either if I choose to let him.

Opposite a dirty, dreary little bistro was the Lido station and Thea looked about for a gondolier. It would take forty-five minutes to return to the Rialto, but she was in no hurry. She had nothing to do. Floating, gliding, drifting—that was her life.

Men watched her beautiful legs as she was helped into the gondola, scrutinized the long wavy strands of red hair blowing back from her white forehead, noted the sharp up-tilting breasts under a creamy lace dress. The wind moulded her into a statue of lace, a late bride.

Late, she thought. But there is nothing to do, yet. The event is coming to me as it did before. Is this an animal or vegetable world? And what are these persons

who stand or talk or work the oar or run the motor?

When she entered her apartment in the old marble palazzo the crimson roses were there, fresh and new. It was going to be Evan, then. Evan of the roses, tall vigorous, wealthy. He need not be immensely wealthy, of course; that had never mattered . . . Slowly she took off her clothes, dropping them on the floor of the salon and wandered into the bedroom. The gold-framed pierglass reflected her slender, firm white body, every curve and indentation delectable.

It was twilight when Evan, in answer to her telephone call arrived, found the door unlocked, saw the clothes and shoes and calling, "Thea . . . ?" went into the bedroom. For weeks she had smiled, teased, kissed and kept him at a fever pitch of desire; he could not believe that now, at last . . .

"Darling, come to me . . ."

Her love-making was the weaving of an intricate tapestry, a work of art, profound, varied, beautiful. But she was thinking; out there in the dark, the voices of the gondoliers, the passengers murmuring, the music. And the liquid water sounds.

Lips clung to her, parted, paused to gasp, "Thea—there never was anyone like you! I never realized . . ."

Don't think. Enjoy . . . while you can." The night was humid

and she turned fretfully in the great warm bed. Turned from the wide, worshipping eyes, the face relaxed, satiated, yet marked with traces of ecstasy.

"I've wanted you for so long. For my wife. Will you?"

Wife. What was wife? Only a woman. Why does he use such terms?

TWO MONTHS LATER, her fingers scrabbling at the pitted gray dirty marble of a street wall for support, she knew she was weak and ill. *A child inside me? That never happened before.* Starving along the narrow street just wide enough for two to walk abreast she saw a small restaurant with colored paper lanterns. She managed to walk that far, sank onto a chair and smiled. "Cognac." Other women (she had known so few) had babies but were not ill until much later. The old buildings of the sinking city towered around her as if to meet at the top and crush the sky.

Go back home; back to comfort. Go back to the black and scarlet striped posts, gold-braceleted in the water. But it is not home anymore. Then it is moving? Running? Running away from a city I love! And she knew that something was in possession of her body, and her body was commanding her as it always had done. Shivering in the strong wind, swallowing the cog-

nac in two gulps, throwing the money on the table, hurrying away. *Cold. Where is the strong hot sun, the dry blinding waves of sunlight so fierce that it is white, not gold, the sky so hot that it is black. Where?*

Someone murmured after the stumbling woman, "But she looks so young. One would have thought it all happened yesterday instead of ten years ago . . ."

When Evan heard the news he was elated, swung her off her feet, shouted, clamored until Thea cried out, "Stop—stop it!"

At once he was gentle; he knelt and rubbed her feet to warm them. "Sorry, Thea. Your nerves. Women at such times."

"Yes." Her voice was harsh; she softened it carefully. *Let him look through the cloud of violet chiffon that streams over me; let his eyes burn looking. But he can make love only to my feet, warming them.* "We must leave here."

Evan stared. "But why?"

"Either I leave alone or with you. I shall be ill until I find . . . a certain place. I don't know yet where it is. But I must travel to discover it."

"We were going to be married here! My friends want to give parties for us. We will have a reception for them . . ."

"Friends?" The full, luscious lips spread in a slow smile. "I am your friend, your only friend, your

mistress, your lover. Do you want the others — or me?"

"Marriage involves . . ."

"Then don't marry me. Let us leave it. I shall go alone."

Evan looked very thoughtful; he was afraid of losing her to another man. Treasure was precious; he had never given up treasure in his life. He was the explorer, the discoverer of new ways of making money, new ways of using power, of finding new treasure.

So they left hastily, secretly, like murderers . . .

AIRBORNE OVER EUROPE, over the Atlantic they went; a calm touched Thea, made of the air, the life between sky and earth. *Here nothing is possible*, she thought; *no action no ideas*. Sun winking on a steel wing; blinking, flashing. The calm vanished. Sun. Her hand tugged suddenly at her dress, darted to her cheek, shoved on the spring releasing the seat to tilt it back.

Evan watched anxiously. "What is it, my dearest? No, don't edge away — look at me!"

"Feel — ill," she lied. *Explain this hot tumult in my body? My commander, my leader, bewildered, demanding endlessly. But what demanding?* "Those magazines," in turn she commanded him.

"Bright shiny pages . . . where to go? Suddenly her eye caught

the words, "Ground Afire . . . the old Indian name, lowest point in United States . . . no visitors after May. Searing heat dangerous . . . desert . . . dry lakes of sand, dunes, great mountains. In winter . . . hotel and camps open." Her pointed. "Here"

"Death Valley?" Her whims, her personality were a challenge to his knowledge. He had always met challenges. "Now really, Thea! Heat and dust. We'd have to drive from Los Angeles. There's nothing there and it's hardly the kind of place you're accustomed to."

Again the long, delicate finger pointed. He thought the bones were shining through the faintly pinkish flesh. And his mind was full of her camelia white skin . . . Visions of past joys tormented Evan. The very long, slender legs that possessed a life of their own, as if they drew in breath and exhaled it again singly, regardless of her body. He longed to be lying beside her on a cool bed or sandy desert. "It's September," he said thoughtfully. "We could go in."

A desert of fire! Drawing me, pulling me — and all the lovely lakes and rivers and seas of my life forgotten. And Evan so close kissing, begging.

"When Thea? Why do you hold yourself from me. When — when?" Later he determined to discipline and tame her; she should not have it all her way.

"After we have seen Ground Afire . . . " Her fingers caressed his wrist, pushing up under the coat sleeve and her leg moved to press his and gently moved up and down. "After that everything will be different my darling, my exciting lover!"

There had been her first fiance and her second; each had committed suicide the day before the wedding. And she, sad bride in black draperies instead of white, receiving condolences. And sorrow. And suspicion. Of course, it had not been suicide. She had managed very cleverly. Her leg was rubbing against his again and, eyes flickering upward she saw the terrible pain and desire on his face.

And hate.

The changing scenes; people's faces were only picture shadows on a giant screen. Within her life was intensified, full of excitement now, waiting for the white sun, the light to flood her, blind her. Outside her citadel way only Evan pacing, prowling, waiting his chance.

The car was a tomb of hot metal burning in the sun as it traveled on into the desert of Ground Afire. They carried extra gasoline and water, a small tent, two sleeping-bags and food. She held a map spread out on her knees, jostling, bumping over the crazy road, her lips drawn back

over her gums in a fixed smile. *It is happening again; life moving inside me so soon—so soon!* Evan, eyes steady on the road shouting, "You're not the type to rough it, Thea!"

IT WAS almost dusk when they stopped, sweating and layered with yellow dust, to make their camp. Evan was concerned over her and the meaningless journey but tried to make a game of it. He joked as he opened sleeping bags and put up the tent; but his words were flat and cold in the great, empty desert. Thea walked about, brought cooking utensils and water from the car, placed them on the ground and every act was absurd, a hideous mockery. She wandered off.

Before her from the flat of the desert the mountain lifted two gaunt arms of rock to form a narrow pass. Behind the pass was Funeral Lake, a lake of sand and baked, cracked earth. Early morning would show the way. While he slept she would go through the pass.

"God, what a road! That trail up and down washes, full of damned boulders, some of them crumbling under the car and the car canting over," he grumbled. Yet he had mastered the road and was proud. "A place for two soft city people to keep away from." But he was smiling in triumph. He had

won over car and road and he would win over her, too.

It was too silent in the tawny land and he went on in a loud, determined voice. "There must be rocks of all geological time divisions here. Rivers of sand and gravel, alluvium flowing down on to the valley floor — you saw as we came along. Everything tilting, folding, faulting, Lava flows."

Someone was there in the last moment of dusk, now turning into dense night. She knew. Where was the fire? He must light a fire quickly! Beside him she was a frozen statue.

"You stay tonight?" came the voice from the dark.

"Yes. Interesting place, isn't it?" Evan was firm.

One of the two men stepped forward. He wore a wide-brimmed black hat with a tall domed crown that set level on his head. Evan suddenly turned on the flashlight and the silver and turquoise band on the Indian's hat flashed. "Night, all right, I think. But in the day — go. Danger."

Thea went nearer, spoke softly. "Funeral Lake?"

"Not good. Tomorrow go."

"Tell me what you know!"

"No one comes, no one goes from this ground. Everything is dead a million years. We come to look for strays once a year. We live on the other side. Go." The Indian joined his companion and

both disappeared into the black night.

DAWN WAS Thea's hour. Defily and silently she left the tent, taking her sandals and thin white cotton dress and blue straw hat. Outside she pulled off her nightgown and slipped on the clothes and, carrying the hat in her hand went off to the towering pass. Were there bits of broken glass in the bunch grass and daisies? Would glass cut her lovely legs, once now pinkly luminous?

She had come through the pass out of the gaunt arms' shadow. She gasped. Great twisted pillars, red, yellow, white starting from pink sandstone castles with terraces where clumps of tough grass and cactus grew, encircled the flat bed of Funeral Lake. Here and there were large potholes, shadowy, unreal. Along the shores of the dry lake necklaces of ebony black pebbles, Apache Tears. And all the castles broken, torn from erosion, earthquakes, volcanos. The angry earth.

She walked on, a strange quiet filling her, and stopped to touch a wall of sand. *Not man-made, but it could have been*, she thought. *Some artist's dream caught in time between his creative thought and execution, unfinished, filling another dimension, unseen, unwitnessed.*

They came out to meet her then,

suddenly from behind a golden wall. Two women smiling, their arms outstretched. "Thea." They came and kissed her cheeks, her mouth. Thea melted in their embraces, released, amazed, but never questioning, for this was the end of her search. And she returned the dazzling smiles, the gestures of love. These shining ones live here. Hair long and free, wearing short dresses of iridescent pinkish stuff, transparent, and naked under the dresses. Their beautiful quick feet in gilded leather and their arms banded with Apache Tears.

"How did you remember the Lake?" they asked. "None of the others remembered. None returned."

"I—don't—know."

"Your mission is not completed." The voice was stern. "It is never finished until you become old and ugly."

"Mission?" But she knew.

"To entice men, to make them slaves of love. To kill them."

"Two dead," Thea murmured. "You say I should not come back. Why?"

The women gestured and she looked and saw a cave with bushes going in the arid soil and berries and a group of astonishingly beautiful little girls laughing and playing. They moved with incredible swiftness, darting here and there. "They will be sent out into the world when they are old

enough and will never recall the Lake. Something strange happened to you or you would not have returned." The slanted, gleaming eyes stared at her and she felt the searing edge of their looks.

Sun hot, coming from bright colored canyon walls; my body perspiring, releasing, life moving. Can they see?

THE WOMEN, moving swiftly, led her to a crevasse among the tilted rock strata and there was shade and they gave her something to drink. Laughter came from further back in the arroyo and two other women appeared, their arms around each other, whispering secrets.

"Our latest love match," The smiles were wise and infinitely ancient. "Here we do not love men. Unfortunately, we depend upon them for breeding. We leave the Lake only to find a strong, handsome stupid male. After we are certain of pregnancy, the male is killed, of course."

Those motionless legs, those bloodless faces, she thought. Lying where I left them, the knife in the hand of one, the gun near the hand of the other. Bride to death. But the third man is still alive.

"My mother. I had a mother at the Lake then, like all the others."

The women frowned. "She would be too old. She would be one of the Gone-Away Ones who are

driven into the desert. Here we are communal. We do not possess objects nor persons. Only do we possess in the brief periods of love-making."

Motion within her belly and she sat rigid, not moving, not pressing hands to her body. *I am different, she thought in desperation. I have a child — and that is wrong. I have returned — wrong. And I have not killed Evan. What would they say if they knew? Do they know? They are beautiful but their bodies are strong and their teeth are pointed and there may be hundreds of them.*

"No one ever finds you? No visitors? Those Indians last night . . ."

The smiles were cruel. "Men who know, stay away. Men who do not know leave bleached bones rotting in the sand. And there are volcanic caves beneath these cones so old, so deep. There we go to — rest . . . Until the rains come."

Back through the pass and out across blistering sand, eyes glazed, white sun filling her, she went. Evan was frantic, angry. Seizing her he poured out questions, warnings. Thea smiled. *Smile like a shining blade; smile the dagger into his vitals.*

All afternoon in the tent until the white sun in the black sky was hidden behind the highest peak she made love to him, drowning him, satiating him, weakening him. At

last he begged her to stop, to rest. "You wanted me."

AND EVAN KNEW somehow that there was death in the air. Her hand flashed, but he surprised her, grabbed the slender silver wire loop and sprang up. "You wanted to kill me! Strangle me! You're mad!"

"It is a joke of the world," she smiled, and laid her hands carelessly upon him again to make him forget.

Evan slapped her face with a blow that rocked her head. "You loved me — adored me . . ."

"I felt nothing." What matter how she killed him? The Lake dwellers would conceal his body so that none of it ever would be found. "Love-making is creative. I'm not a painter nor poet. I love and I create."

"By using your sex," he said. "And you hate yourself because this is the only way you have. You can't rise above it! Murderess — you carry our child in your body!"

Gripping her arm he twisted it behind her painfully; they fought naked on the earth as had the primeval men and women. Suddenly, a film passed over her eyes and in a moment vanished. She went limp, broken, sobbing for his forgiveness while horror swept over her. Evan released her and Thea sprang away from him, hands

scrabbling for sandals and clothes. "Must go—must hurry!" she cried, flinging on her dress, shoving her feet into the sandals. "The car . . ."

The tent trembled; the sound of rushing feet. Hands took Evan, dragged him outside. Thea, running to help him, was caught and held fast and forced to watch the women attack their prey. Wet lips shining, white teeth gleaming, mouths avid, closing on flesh. And in their hands black, sharp obsidian knives, the black glass tenderly slicing, slicing . . .

Evan did not plead; he only cursed until his lips were cut away by savage kisses and he died.

Two weeks later the child was born, the quick birth in excruciating pain of the Lake dwellers. How to save the child from them; how to escape . . . Dizzily thoughts whirled through her brain in misty kaleodscope.

They bent over her and cut the cord.

Smiling, they took the girl child from her. "Ours," they said softly.

WHEN THE ranger, making a routine yearly check, found a new car smashed by great bould-

ers that could not have rolled down by themselves he was greatly puzzled. There was no trace of the car's occupants. Going through the pass to Funeral Lake he searched the sandy shore, the arroyos, shouting over and over again. There was no answer from the dry earth.

The only life was in one of the potholes where water was found after a little rain. Dozens of branchiopoda, the tadpole shrimp and clam shrimp were swimming, darting with great speed to and fro. "The gill-feet are back," he said aloud. Shells on their backs, pink undersides, antennae and fluttering legs through which they breathed by means of gills. Fossils of these most primitive of crustaceans had been found in other parts of Death Valley, dating back millions of years in time. And he remembered that the first sea creatures had climbed painfully up onto the land and had become land creatures. "A little rain," he muttered, bending down closer over the pothole.

Then, for a moment he thought he heard the echo of voices from far, far deep down. But this, of course, was impossible.



The Wind In The Rose-Bush

by Mary Wilkins-Freeman

(author of *Luella Miller*, *The Empty Lot*, etc.)

While there was no such thing as an all-weird story magazine when MARY WILKINS-FREEMAN wrote this tale which leads off the collection with the same title, first published in 1903, there were certainly weird story enthusiasts amongst her readers. And I think such fans spotted one piece of the mystery presented here as quickly as you will; it isn't at all difficult. But the author has more up her sleeve, which she presents at her own pace (a suspenseful pace despite its very leisurely motion) and you may find that when you reach the end that you had not deduced everything after all.

FORD VILLAGE has no railroad station, being on the other side of the river from Porter's Falls, and accessible only by the ford which gives it its name, and a ferry line.

The ferry-boat was waiting when Rebecca Flint got off the train with her bag and lunch basket. When she and her small trunk were safely embarked she sat stiff and straight and calm in the ferry-

boat as it shot swiftly and smoothly across stream. There was a horse attached to a light country wagon on board, and he pawed the deck uneasily. His owner stood near, with a wary eye upon him, although he was chewing, with as dully reflective an expression as a cow. Beside Rebecca sat a woman of about her own age, who kept looking at her with furtive curiosity; her husband, short and stout and saturnine, stood near her. Rebecca paid no attention to either of them. She was tall and spare and pale, the type of a spinster, yet with rudimentary lines and expressions of matronhood. She all unconsciously held her shawl, rolled up in a canvas bag, on her left hip, as if it had been a child. She wore a settled frown of dissent at life, but it was the frown of a mother who regarded life as a froward child, rather than as an overwhelming fate.

The other woman continued staring at her; she was mildly stupid, except for an overdeveloped curiosity which made her at times sharp beyond belief. Her eyes glittered, red spots came on her flaccid cheeks; she kept opening her mouth to speak, making little abortive motions. Finally she could endure it no longer; she nudged Rebecca boldly.

"A pleasant day," said she.

Rebecca looked at her and nodded coldly.

"Yes, very," she assented.

"Have you come far?"

"I have come from Michigan."

"Oh!" said the woman, with awe. "It's a long way," she remarked presently.

"Yes, it is," replied Rebecca, conclusively.

Still the other woman was not daunted; there was something which she determined to know, possibly roused thereto by a vague sense of incongruity in the other's appearance. "It's a long ways to come and leave a family," she remarked with painful slyness.

"I ain't got any family to leave," returned Rebecca shortly.

"Then you ain't . . ."

"No, I ain't."

"Oh!" said the woman.

Rebecca looked straight ahead at the race of the river.

It was a long ferry. Finally Rebecca herself waxed unexpectedly loquacious. She turned to the other woman and inquired if she knew John Dent's widow who lived in Ford Village. "Her husband died about three years ago," said she, by way of detail.

The woman started violently. She turned pale, then she flushed; she cast a strange glance at her husband, who was regarding both women with a sort of stolid keenness.

"Yes, I guess I do," faltered the woman finally.

"Well, his first wife was my

sister," said Rebecca with the air of one imparting important intelligence.

"Was she?" responded the other woman feebly. She glanced at her husband with an expression of doubt and terror, and he shook his head forbiddingly.

"I'm going to see her, and take my niece Agnes home with me," said Rebecca.

THEN THE WOMAN gave such a violent start that she noticed it.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"Nothin', I guess," replied the woman with eyes on her husband, who was slowly shaking his head like a Chinese toy.

"Is my niece sick?" asked Rebecca with quick suspicion.

"No, she ain't sick," replied the woman with alacrity, then she caught her breath again.

"She ought to have grown up real pretty, if she takes after my sister. She was a real pretty woman," Rebecca said wistfully.

"Yes, I guess she did grow up pretty," replied the woman in a trembling voice.

"What kind of a woman is the second wife?"

The woman glanced at her husband's warning face. She continued to gaze at him while she replied in a choking voice to Rebecca:

"I—guess she's a nice woman," she replied. "I—don't know, I—guess so. I—don't see much of her."

"I felt kind of hurt that John married again so quick," said Rebecca; "but I suppose he wanted his house kept, and Agnes wanted care. I wasn't so situated that I could take her when her mother died. I had my own mother to care for, and I was school-teaching. Now mother has gone, and my uncle died six months ago and left me quite a little property, and I've come for Agnes. I guess she'll be glad to go with me, though I suppose her stepmother is a good woman, and has always done for her."

The man's warning shake at his wife was fairly portentous.

"I guess so," said she.

"John always wrote that she was a beautiful woman," said Rebecca.

Then the ferry-boat grated on the shore.

JOHN DENT'S widow had sent a horse and wagon to meet her sister-in-law. When the woman and her husband went down the road, on which Rebecca in the wagon with her trunk soon passed them, she said reproachfully:

"Seems as if I'd ought to have told her, Thomas."

"Let her find it out herself," replied the man. "Don't you go to

burnin' your fingers in other folks' puddin', Maria."

"Do you s'pose she'll see anything?" asked the woman with a spasmodic shudder and a terrified roll of her eyes.

"See!" returned her husband with stolid scorn. "Better be sure there's anything to see."

"Oh, Thomas, they say . . ."

"Lord, ain't you found out that what they say is mostly lies?"

"But if it should be true, and she's a nervous woman, she might be scared enough to lose her wits," said his wife, staring uneasily after Rebecca's erect figure in the wagon disappearing over the crest of the hilly road.

"Wits that so easy upset ain't worth much," declared the man. "You keep out of it, Maria."

Rebecca in the meantime rode on in the wagon, beside a flaxen-headed boy, who looked, to her understanding, not very bright. She asked him a question, and he paid no attention. She repeated it, and he responded with a bewildered and incoherent grunt. Then she let him alone, after making sure that he knew how to drive straight.

They had traveled about half a mile, passed the village square, and gone a short distance beyond, when the boy drew up with a sudden *Whoa!* before a very prosperous-looking house. It had been one of the aboriginal cottages of the vicinity, small and white, with a

roof extending on one side over a piazza, and a tiny "L" jutting out in the rear, on the right hand. Now the cottage was transformed by dormer windows, a bay window on the piazzaless side, a carved railing down the front steps, and a modern hard-wood door.

"Is this John Dent's house?" asked Rebecca.

The boy was as sparing of speech as a philosopher. His only response was in flinging the reins over the horse's back, stretching out one foot to the shaft, and leaping out of the wagon, then going around to the rear for the trunk. Rebecca got out and went toward the house. Its white paint had a new gloss; its blinds were an immaculate apple green; the lawn was trimmed as smooth as velvet, and it was dotted with scrupulous groups of hydrangeas and cannas.

"I always understood that John Dent was well-to-do," Rebecca reflected comfortably. "I guess Agnes will have considerable. I've got enough, but it will come in handy for her schooling. She can have advantages."

The boy dragged the trunk up the fine gravel-walk, but before he reached the steps leading up to the piazza, for the house stood on a terrace, the front door opened and a fair, frizzled head of a very large and handsome woman appeared. She held up her black

silk skirt, disclosing voluminous ruffles of starched embroidery, and waited for Rebecca. She smiled placidly, her pink, double-chinned face widened and dimpled, but her blue eyes were wary and calculating. She extended her hand as Rebecca climbed the steps.

"This is Miss Flint, I suppose," said she.

"Yes, ma'am," replied Rebecca, noticing with bewilderment a curious expression compounded of fear and defiance on the other's face.

"Your letter only arrived this morning," said Mrs. Dent, in a steady voice. Her great face was a uniform pink, and her china-blue eyes were at once aggressive and veiled with secrecy.

"Yes, I hardly thought you'd get my letter," replied Rebecca. "I felt as if I could not wait to hear from you before I came. I supposed you would be so situated that you could have me a little while without putting you out too much, from what John used to write me about his circumstances, and when I had that money so unexpected I felt as if I must come for Agnes. I suppose you will be willing to give her up. You know she's my own blood, and of course she's no relation to you, though you must have got attached to her. I know from her picture what a sweet girl she must be, and John always said she looked like her

own mother, and Grace was a beautiful woman, if she was my sister."

REBECCA STOPPED and stared at the other woman in amazement and alarm. The great handsome blonde creature stood speechless, livid, gasping, with her hand to her heart, her lips parted in a horrible caricature of a smile.

"Are you sick!" cried Rebecca, drawing near. "Don't you want me to get you some water!"

Then Mrs. Dent recovered herself with a great effort. "It is nothing," she said. "I am subject to—spells. I am over it now. Won't you come in, Miss Flint?"

As she spoke, the beautiful deep-rose color suffused her face, her blue eyes met her visitor's with the opaqueness of turquoise—with a revelation of blue, but a concealment of all behind.

Rebecca followed her hostess in, and the boy, who had waited quiescently, climbed the steps with the trunk. But before they entered the door a strange thing happened. On the upper terrace, close to the piazza-post, grew a great rose-bush, and on it, late in the season though it was, one small red, perfect rose.

Rebecca looked at it, and the other woman extended her hand with a quick gesture. "Don't you pick that rose!" she brusquely cried.

Rebecca drew herself up with stiff dignity.

"I ain't in the habit of picking other folks' roses without leave," said she.

As Rebecca spoke she started violently, and lost sight of her resentment, for something singular happened. Suddenly the rose-bush was agitated violently as if by a gust of wind, yet it was a remarkably still day. Not a leaf of the hydrangea standing on the terrace close to the rose trembled.

"What on earth . . ." began Rebecca, then she stopped with a gasp at the sight of the other woman's face. Although a face, it gave somehow the impression of a desperately clutched hand of secrecy.

"Come in!" said she in a harsh voice, which seemed to come forth from her chest with no intervention of the organs of speech. "Come into the house. I'm getting cold out here."

"What makes that rose-bush blow so when there isn't any wind?" asked Rebecca, trembling with vague horror, yet resolute.

"I don't see as it is blowing," returned the woman calmly. And as she spoke, indeed, the bush was quiet.

"It was blowing," declared Rebecca.

"It isn't now," said Mrs. Dent. "I can't try to account for every-

thing that blows out-or-doors. I have too much to do."

She spoke scornfully and confidently, with defiant, unflinching eyes, first on the bush, then on Rebecca, and led the way into the house.

"It looked queer," persisted Rebecca, but she followed, and also the boy with the trunk.

Rebecca entered an interior, prosperous, even elegant, according to her simple ideas. There were Brussels carpets, lace curtains, and plenty of brilliant upholstery and polished wood.

"You're real nicely situated," remarked Rebecca, after she had become a little accustomed to her new surroundings and the two women were seated at the tea-table.

Mrs. Dent stared with a hard complacency from behind her silver-plated service. "Yes, I be," said she.

"You got all the things new?" said Rebecca hesitatingly, with a jealous memory of her dead sister's bridal furnishings.

"Yes," said Mrs. Dent; "I was never one to want dead folks' things, and I had money enough of my own, so I wasn't beholden to John. I had the old duds put up at auction. They didn't bring much."

"I suppose you saved some for Agnes. She'll want some of her poor mother's things when she is



“What makes that rose-bush blow so when there
isn't any wind?”

(illustration by Peter Newell)

grown up," said Rebecca with some indignation.

The defiant stare of Mrs. Dent's blue eyes waxed more intense. "There's a few things up garret," said she.

"She'll be likely to value them," remarked Rebecca. As she spoke she glanced at the window. "Isn't it most time for her to be coming home?" she asked.

"Most time," answered Mrs. Dent carelessly; "but when she gets over to Addie Slocum's she never knows when to come home."

"Is Addie Slocum her intimate friend?"

"Intimate as any."

"Maybe we can have her come out to see Agnes when she's living with me," said Rebecca wistfully. "I suppose she'll be likely to be homesick at first."

"Most likely," answered Mrs. Dent.

"Does she call you mother?" Rebecca asked.

"No, she calls me Aunt Emeline," replied the other woman shortly. "When did you say you were going home?"

"In about a week, I thought, if she can be ready to go so soon," answered Rebecca with a surprised look.

SHE REFLECTED that she would not remain a day longer than she could help after such an inhospitable look and question.

"Oh, as far as that goes," said Mrs. Dent, "it wouldn't make any difference about her being ready. You could go home whenever you felt that you must, and she could come afterward."

"Alone?"

"Why not? She's a big girl now, and you don't have to change cars."

"My niece will go home when I do, and not travel alone; and if I can't wait here for her, in the house that used to be her mother's and my sister's home, I'll go and board somewhere," returned Rebecca with warmth.

"Oh, you can stay here as long as you want to. You're welcome," said Mrs. Dent.

Then Rebecca started. "There she is!" she declared in a trembling, exultant voice. Nobody knew how she longed to see the girl.

"She isn't as late as I thought she'd be," said Mrs. Dent, and again that curious, subtle change passed over her face, and again it settled into that stony impassiveness.

Rebecca stared at the door, waiting for it to open. "Where is she?" she asked presently.

"I guess she's stopped to take off her hat in the entry," suggested Mrs. Dent.

Rebecca waited. "Why don't she come? It can't take her all this time to take off her hat."

For answer Mrs. Dent rose with a stiff jerk and threw open the door.

"Agnes!" she called. "Agnes!" Then she turned and eyed Rebecca. "She ain't there."

"I saw her pass the window," said Rebecca in bewilderment.

"You must have been mistaken."

"I know I did," persisted Rebecca.

"You couldn't have."

"I did. I saw first a shadow go over the ceiling, then I saw her in the glass there" — she pointed to a mirror over the sideboard opposite — "and then the shadow passed the window."

"How did she look in the glass?"

"Little and light-haired, with the light hair kind of tossing over her forehead."

"You couldn't have seen her."

"Was that like Agnes?"

"Like enough; but of course you didn't see her. You've been thinking so much about her that you thought did."

"You thought *you* did."

"I thought I saw a shadow pass the window, but I must have been mistaken. She didn't come in, or we would have seen her before now. I knew it was too early for her to get home from Addie Slocum's, anyhow."

WHEN REBECCA went to

bed Agnes had not returned. Rebecca had resolved that she would not retire until the girl came, but she was very tired, and she reasoned with herself that she was foolish. Besides, Mrs. Dent suggested that Agnes might go to the church social with Addie Slocum. When Rebecca suggested that she be sent for and told that her aunt had come, Mrs. Dent laughed meaningly.

"I guess you'll find out that a young girl ain't so ready to leave a sociable, where there's boys, to see her aunt," said she.

"She's too young," said Rebecca incredulously and indignant-ly.

"She's sixteen," replied Mrs. Dent; "and she's always been great for the boys."

"She's going to school four years after I get her before she thinks of boys," declared Rebecca.

"We'll see," laughed the other woman.

After Rebecca went to bed, she lay awake a long time listening for the sound of girlish laughter and a boy's voice under her window; then she fell asleep.

The next morning she was down early. Mrs. Dent, who kept no servants, was busily preparing breakfast.

"Don't Agnes help you about breakfast?" asked Rebecca.

"No, I let her lay," replied Mrs. Dent shortly.

"What time did she get home last night?"

"She didn't get home. She stayed with Addie. She often does.

"Without sending you word?"

"Oh, she knew I wouldn't worry."

"When will she be home?"

"Oh, I guess she'll be along pretty soon."

Rebecca was uneasy, but she tried to conceal it, for she knew of no good reason for uneasiness. What was there to occasion alarm in the fact of one young girl staying overnight with another? She could not eat much breakfast. Afterward she went out on the little piazza, although her hostess strove furtively to stop her.

"Why don't you go out back of the house? It's real pretty—a view over the river," she said.

"I guess I'll go out here," replied Rebecca. She had a purpose: to watch for the absent girl.

Presently Rebecca came hustling into the house through the sitting-room, into the kitchen where Mrs. Dent was cooking.

"That rose-bush!" she gasped.

Mrs. Dent turned and faced her.

"What of it?"

"It's a-blowing."

"What of it?"

"There isn't a mite of wind this morning."

Mrs. Dent turned with an inimitable toss of her fair head. "If you think I can spend my time puz-

zling over such nonsense as . . ." she began, but Rebecca interrupted her with a cry and a rush to the door.

"There she is now!" she cried.

She flung the door wide open, and curiously enough a breeze came in and her own gray hair tossed, and a paper blew off the table to the floor with a loud rustle, but there was nobody in sight.

"There's nobody here," Rebecca said.

She looked blankly at the other woman, who brought her rolling-pin down on a slab of pie-crust with a thud.

"I didn't hear anybody," she said calmly.

"*I saw somebody pass that window!*"

"You were mistaken again."

"*I know* I saw somebody."

"You couldn't have. Please shut that door."

Rebecca shut the door. She sat down beside the window and looked out on the autumnal yard, with its little curve of footpath to the kitchen door.

"What smells so strong of roses in this room?" she said presently. She sniffed hard.

"I don't smell anything but these nutmegs."

"It is not nutmeg."

"I don't smell anything else."

"Where do you suppose Agnes is?"

"Oh, perhaps she has gone over

the ferry to Porter's Falls with Addie. She often does. Addie's got an aunt over there, and Addie's got a cousin, a real pretty boy."

"You suppose she's gone over there?"

"Mebbe. I shouldn't wonder."

"When should she be home?"

"Oh, not before afternoon."

REBECCA WAITED with all the patience she could muster. She kept reassuring herself, telling herself that it was all natural, that the other woman could not help it, but she made up her mind that if Agnes did not return that afternoon she should be sent for.

When it was four o'clock she started up with resolution. She had been furtively watching the onyx clock on the sitting-room mantel; she had timed herself. She had said that if Agnes was not home by that time she should demand that she be sent for. She rose and stood before Mrs. Dent, who looked up coolly from her embroidery.

"I've waited just as long as I'm going to," she said. "I've come 'way from Michigan to see my own sister's daughter and take her home with me. I've been here ever since yesterday—twenty-four hours—and I haven't seen her. Now I'm going to. I want her sent for."

Mrs. Dent folded her embroidery and rose.

"Well, I don't blame you," she

said. "It is high time she came home. I'll go right over and get her myself."

Rebecca heaved a sigh of relief. She hardly knew what she had suspected or feared, but she knew that her position had been one of antagonism if not accusation, and she was sensible of relief.

"I wish you would," she said gratefully, and went back to her chair, while Mrs. Dent got her shawl and her little white head-tie. "I wouldn't trouble you, but I do feel as if I couldn't wait any longer to see her," she remarked apologetically.

"Oh, it ain't any trouble at all," said Mrs. Dent as she went out. "I don't blame you; you have waited long enough."

Rebecca sat at the window watching breathlessly until Mrs. Dent came stepping through the yard alone. She ran to the door and saw, hardly noticing it this time, that the rose-bush was again violently agitated, yet with no wind evident elsewhere.

"Where is she?" she cried.

Mrs. Dent laughed with stiff lips as she came up the steps over the terrace. "Girls will be girls," said she. "She's gone with Addie to Lincoln. Addie's got an uncle who's conductor on the train, and lives there, and he got 'em passes, and they're goin' to stay to Addie's Aunt Margaret's a few days. Mrs. Slocum said Agnes didn't have time

to come over and ask me before the train went, but she took it on herself to say it would be all right, and . . ."

"Why hadn't she been over to tell you?" Rebecca was angry, though not suspicious. She even saw no reason for her anger. "Oh, she was putting up grapes. She was coming over just as soon as she got the black off her hands. She heard I had company, and her hands were a sight. She was holding them over sulphur matches."

"You say she's going to stay a few days?" repeated Rebecca dazedly.

"Yes; till Thursday, Mrs. Slocum said."

"How far is Lincoln from here?"

"About fifty miles. It'll be a real treat to her. Mrs. Slocum's sister is a real nice woman."

"It is goin' to make it pretty late about my goin' home."

"If you don't feel as if you could wait, I'll get her ready and send her on just as soon as I can," Mrs. Dent said sweetly.

"I'm going to wait," said Rebecca grimly.

The two women sat down again, and Mrs. Dent took up her embroidery.

"Is there any sewing I can do for her?" Rebecca asked finally in a desperate way. "If I can get her sewing along some . . ."

Mrs. Dent arose with alacrity and fetched a mass of white from

the closet. "Here," she said, "if you want to sew the lace on this nightgown. I was going to put her to it, but she'll be glad enough to get rid of it. She ought to have this and one more before she goes. I don't like to send her away without some good underclothing."

Rebecca snatched at the little white garment and sewed feverishly.

THAT NIGHT she awakened from a deep sleep a little after midnight and lay a minute trying to collect her faculties and explain to herself what she was listening to. At last she discovered that it was the then popular strains of "The Maiden's Prayer" floating up through the floor from the piano in the sitting-room below. She jumped up, threw a shawl over her nightgown, and hurried downstairs trembling. There was nobody in the sitting-room; the piano was silent. She ran to Mrs. Dent's bedroom and called hysterically:

"Emeline! Emeline!"

"What is it?" asked Mrs. Dent's voice from the bed. The voice was stern, but had a note of consciousness in it.

"Who—who was that playing 'The Maiden's Prayer' in the sitting-room, on the piano?"

"I didn't hear anybody."

"There was some one."

"I didn't hear anything."

"I tell you there was some one."

But—*there ain't anybody there.*"

"I didn't hear anything."

"I did—somebody playing 'The Maiden's Prayer' on the piano. Has Agnes got home? I *want to know.*"

"Of course Agnes hasn't got home," answered Mrs. Dent with rising inflection. "Be you gone crazy over that girl? The last boat from Porter's Falls was in before we went to bed. Of course she ain't come."

"I heard . . ."

"You were dreaming."

"I wasn't; I was broad awake."

Rebecca went back to her chamber and kept her lamp burning all night.

The next morning her eyes upon Mrs. Dent were wary and blazing with suppressed excitement. She kept opening her mouth as if to speak, then frowning, and setting her lips hard. After breakfast she went upstairs, and came down presently with her coat and bonnet.

"Now, Emeline," she said, "I want to know where the Slocums live."

Mrs. Dent gave a strange, long, half-lidded glance at her. She was finishing her coffee.

"Why?" she asked.

"I'm going over there and find out if they have heard anything from her daughter and Agnes since they went away. I don't like what I heard last night."

"You must have been dreaming."

"It don't make any odds whether I was or not. Does she play 'The Maiden's Prayer' on the piano? I want to know."

"What if she does? She plays it a little, I believe. I don't know. She don't half play it, anyhow; she ain't got an ear."

"That wasn't half played last night. I don't like such things happening. I ain't superstitious, but I don't like it. I'm going. Where do the Slocums live?"

"You go down the road over the bridge past the old grist mill, then you turn to the left; it's the only house for half a mile. You can't miss it. It has a barn with a ship in full sail on the cupola."

"Well, I'm going. I don't feel easy."

ABOUT TWO HOURS later Rebecca returned. There were red spots on her cheeks. She looked wild. "I've been there," she said, "and there isn't a soul at home. Something *has* happened."

"What has happened?"

"I don't know. Something. I had a warning last night. There wasn't a soul there. They've been sent for to Lincoln."

"Did you see anybody to ask?" asked Mrs. Dent with thinly concealed anxiety.

"I asked the woman that lives on the turn of the road. She's

stone deaf. I suppose you know. She listened while I screamed at her to know where the Slocums were, and then she said, 'Mrs. Smith don't live here.' I didn't see anybody on the road, and that's the only house. What do you suppose it means?"

"I don't suppose it means much of anything," replied Mrs. Dent coolly. "Mr. Slocum is conductor on the railroad, and he'd be away anyway, and Mrs. Slocum often goes early when he does, to spend the day with her sister in Porter's Falls. She'd be more likely to go away than Addie."

"And you don't think anything has happened?" Rebecca asked with diminishing distrust before the reasonableness of it.

"Land, no!"

Rebecca went upstairs to lay aside her coat and bonnet. But she came hurrying back with them still on.

"Who's been in my room?" she gasped. Her face was pale as ashes.

Mrs. Dent also paled as she regarded her.

"What do you mean?" she asked slowly.

"I found when I went upstairs that—little nightgown of—Agnes's on—the bed, laid out. It was—*laid out*. The sleeves were folded across the bosom, and there was that little rose between them. Emeline, what

is it? Emeline, what's the matter? Oh!"

Mrs. Dent was struggling for breath in great, choking gasps. She clung to the back of a chair. Rebecca, trembling herself so she could scarcely keep on her feet, got her some water.

As soon as she recovered herself Mrs. Dent regarded her with eyes full of the strangest mixture of fear and horror and hostility.

"What do you mean talking so?" she said in a hard voice.

"It is *there*."

"Nonsense. You threw it down and it fell that way."

"It was folded in my bureau drawer."

"It couldn't have been."

"Who picked that red rose?"

"Look at the bush," Mrs. Dent replied shortly.

REBECCA LOOKED at her; her mouth gaped. She hurried out of the room. When she came back her eyes seemed to protrude. (She had in the meantime hastened upstairs, and come down with tottering steps, clinging to the banisters.)

"Now I want to know what all this means?" she demanded.

"What what means?"

"The rose is on the bush, and it's gone from the bed in my room! Is this house haunted, or what?"

"I don't know anything about a house being haunted. I don't

believe in such things. Be you crazy?" Mrs. Dent spoke with gathering force. The color flashed back to her cheeks.

"No," said Rebecca shortly. "I ain't crazy yet, but I shall be if this keeps on much longer. I'm going to find out where that girl is before night."

Mrs. Dent eyed her.

"What be you going to do?"

"I'm going to Lincoln."

A faint triumphant smile overspread Mrs. Dent's large face.

"You can't," said she; "there ain't any train."

"No train?"

"No; there ain't any afternoon train from the Falls to Lincoln."

"Then I'm going over to the Slocums' again tonight."

However, Rebecca did not go; such a rain came up as deterred even her resolution, and she had only her best dresses with her. Then in the evening came the letter from the Michigan village which she had left nearly a week ago. It was from her cousin, a single woman, who had come to keep her house while she was away. It was a pleasant unexciting letter enough, all the first of it, and related mostly how she missed Rebecca; how she hoped she was having pleasant weather and kept her health; and how her friend, Mrs. Greenaway, had come to stay with her since she had felt lonesome the first night in the house; how she hoped Rebecca

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would have no objections to this, although nothing had been said about it, since she had not realized that she might be nervous alone. The cousin was painfully conscientious, hence the letter. Rebecca smiled in spite of her disturbed mind as she read it, then her eye caught the postscript. That was in a different hand, purporting to be written by the friend, Mrs. Hannah Greenaway, informing her that the cousin had fallen down the cellar stairs and broken her hip, and was in a dangerous condition, and begging Rebecca to return at once, as she herself was rheumatic and unable to nurse her properly, and no one else could be obtained.

REBECCA LOOKED at Mrs. Dent, who had come to her room with the letter quite late; it was half-past nine, and she had gone upstairs for the night.

"Where did this come from?" she asked.

"Mr. Amblecrom brought it," she replied.

"Who's he?"

"The postmaster. He often brings the letters that come on the late mail. He knows I ain't anybody to send. He brought yours about your coming. He said he and his wife came over on the ferry-boat with you."

"I remember him," Rebecca replied shortly. "There's bad news in this letter."

Mrs. Dent's face took on an expression of serious inquiry.

"Yes, my Cousin Harriet has fallen down the cellar stairs—they were always dangerous—and she's broken her hip, and I've got to take the first train home tomorrow."

"You don't say so. I'm dreadfully sorry."

"No, you ain't sorry!" said Rebecca, with a look as if she leaped. "You're glad. I don't know why, but you're glad. You're glad. You've wanted to get rid of me for some reason ever since I came. I don't know why. You're a strange woman. Now you've got your way, and I hope you're satisfied."

"How you talk."

Mrs. Dent spoke in a faintly injured voice, but there was a light in her eyes.

"I talk the way it is. Well, I'm going tomorrow morning, and I want you, just as soon as Agnes Dent comes home, to send her out to me. Don't you wait for anything. You pack what clothes she's got, and don't wait even to mend them, and you buy her ticket. I'll leave money, and you send her along. She don't have to change cars. You start her off, when she gets home, on the next train!"

"Very will," replied the other woman. She had an expression of covert amusement.

"Mind you do it."

"Very well, Rebecca."

REBECCA STARTED on her journey the next morning. When she arrived, two days later, she found her cousin in perfect health. She found, moreover, that the friend had not written the postscript in the cousin's letter. Rebecca would have returned to Ford Village the next morning, but the fatigue and nervous strain had been too much for her. She was not able to move from her bed. She had a species of low fever induced by anxiety and fatigue. But she could write, and she did, to the Slocums, and she received no answer. She also wrote to Mrs. Dent; she even sent numerous telegrams, with no response. Finally she wrote to the postmaster, and

an answer arrived by the first possible mail. The letter was short, curt, and to the purpose. Mr Amblecrom, the postmaster, was a man of few words, and especially wary as to his expressions in a letter.

"Dear madam," he wrote, "Your favour rec'd. No Slocums in Ford's Village. All dead. Addie ten years ago, her mother two years later, her father five. House vacant. Mrs. John Dent said to have neglected stepdaughter. Girl was sick. Medicine not given. Talk of taking action. Not enough evidence. House said to be haunted. Strange sights and sounds. Your niece, Agnes Dent, died a year ago, about this time.

"Yours truly,

"THOMAS AMBLECROM."



The Last of Placide's Wife

by Kirk Mashburn

(author of *Placide's Wife*)

Placide's Wife was beaten only by Seabury Quinn's *The Cloth of Madness*, when we presented it to you in our August 1965 issue (#10); since then, many have requested the sequel. We regret not being able to offer you a reproduction of the original drawing that accompanied the story in *WEIRD TALES*. It was a great temptation to run it, because we liked it and still do—but if we did, you would know exactly how the story ended, in detail.

IT MUST have been a fierce and bloody fight. I heard excited talk of it as soon as I stepped from the train in Labranch. My duties as district highway engineer had brought me there the year before (1931), and

nearly everyone in the little town knew who I was. But they are folk shy in the presence of strangers, most of them, in that rural, almost isolated section. I was an outsider, and sensed something of their talk kept apart from me as such.

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I heard only that there had been a wild fight, the night before, between the sheriff's men and a gang of murderous gypsies—though particulars were more than vague about the gypsies. On the island in the fork of Labranch Bayou, they said it was; and that roused my interest at once. For it was there the highway department was building a difficult stretch of road no contractor had cared to undertake. I hurried to the island, and what I found in the road camp brought me back at once to town.

I had been told—almost the only definite information I had got—that I would find young Delacroix, the timekeeper and camp clerk, at the only hotel in Labranch. I located his room and, entered in a considerable temper, when he opened to my knock.

"Come in—sit down," Delacroix greeted me pleasantly, waving to a chair and himself slumped casually upon the bed. His gesture embraced a bottle of whisky, half empty, that sat upon a table handy to his reach. "Have a drink?"

"No, I won't have a drink!" I snapped. "Is everybody else drunk, too? I went out to the job, and found two teams idling around, and a half-dozen Cajun and Negro laborers sitting stupidly on stumps—no engineer, no foreman, no timekeeper—nobody!"

"I guess so," Delacroix agreed vaguely, pouring himself a drink. I was by now thoroughly exasperated.

"You guess so!" I exploded. "You're like those Cajun laborers, for all your two years at the university! The total information I got out of them was where to find you. They wouldn't even tell me where the foreman was. Nor Gregory." The later was the department's section engineer.

"They don't know where Gregory and the foreman are—but you'll never see *them* again," Delacroix informed mildly, after he had swallowed his drink. Then, with sudden force—"Have a drink and keep quiet—or just keep quiet—and I'll tell you about it. *Sit down!*"

Startled, I obeyed without thinking, dropping into the chair behind me. As I was on the point of rising and rescuing my dignity, Delacroix's words caught my attention. Forgetting my anger, I sat and listened.

This it the meat of what I heard:

OLD MAN LANDRY (Delacroix began) had a son who was attacked, one evening after sunset, while he was hunting in the woods of Labranch Island. They found what was left of him the next day, a small wound in his throat, and his body drained of blood. Well! Right away, everybody said that

Placide's wife did it—the wife Placide Duboin buried one night a dozen years ago, because he thought he had killed her. But Nita, his wife, came out of her grave, an undead thing who preyed on the living after sundown. Placide was her first victim.

This dead-alive woman, who lay like a corpse in her grave during each day, rose and walked abroad at night between sunset and dawn, seeking living victims to quench her thirst for blood. Old Landry's son was one of the first to fall her prey, nearly eleven years ago. They found him the next day, and buried him with a stake through his heart. So he did not lie where Nita left him, to arise the next night with his own terrible craving for blood—to be from then on, another such thing as she.

Oh? No, I am not drunk; not yet, at any rate. I am trying to tell you what became of Gregory, and why the road camp is almost empty. Do you want to listen, or not?

Well, anyway, Nita, and those who fell into her clutches and became like her could not get off that island between the forks of Labranch Bayou, an island some six to eight miles wide, by nearly fifteen miles long. (Vampires and werewolves, you understand, can not cross running water.)

It is across this island that we have been building the new high-

way. One night, not very long ago, while I was telling Gregory the story of Placide's wife, there was a knock on the door. And who do you suppose was there? Placide's wife, herself! She pretended otherwise, naturally, but I recognized her and called to old Landry, who had hoped to meet her, and been prepared for the meeting, ever since his son's death. He carried a gun loaded with silver bullets blessed by the priest, the only kind that can kill a vampire. But Nita ran to the woods before Landry came up, and I kept him from following. In the forest, with her pack around her, she would have made short work of the old man.

It had become the main thing in Landry's life, to even up with Nita on account of his son. He finally got so impatient that he went into the woods alone, one evening, hoping to put a silver bullet into Nita. Doubtless he was a little crazy on the subject. And it turned out that Nita got him! At least, we found he had gone, and he did not come back.

Gregory was sort of skeptical, and didn't much believe the story I told him about Placide's wife. He insisted Nita was nothing but one of a band of gypsy thieves and murderers. He was a special deputy sheriff, Gregory, so he could carry a gun, on account of our payroll and things like that, and he was pretty mad, you under-

stand, about old man Landry. He was already disgusted because it was hard for us to get men who were not afraid of Nita and would stay in our camp on the island at night, and they would come straggling in late every morning. So Gregory got most of our men together the next morning and gave them guns; then sent word to the sheriff here in Labbranch, that he was going into the swamps and round up the "gypsies". Ha! I was one of those who went.

We went clear down to where the swamp begins at the end of the island on the bay, without seeing any sign of anybody except two trappers we ran across, men we knew. Nobody expected to find Nita, except Gregory. The men began to get uneasy, late in the afternoon, and decided to turn back before sundown caught us away from camp. Gregory didn't like it, but what was he going to do? The men told him he could stay if he wanted, but they were going back. Gregory used some language I wish I could remember—me, I never can say what I want to when I'm mad!—but he turned back with the rest.

SUNDOWN FOUND US a good mile away from camp, deep in the woods. We still could count on nearly an hour of daylight, and Gregory sneered at the men's uneasiness because the sun had

set. But everybody else *was* uneasy, some more than others. The woods were thick, and in the fading light of late day, dim and shadowy. Except for the noise we made ourselves, the forest was still and quiet. But it was an uncomfortable quiet, as if the trees all around us hid things that watched, and waited their own time to show themselves. So!

Suddenly, amid startled exclamations, we stopped in our tracks. Anybody would have stopped! I think we all saw the gleaming shape that barred our way, at the same moment. In a little cleared space ahead of us stood a slender figure, a woman whose body gleamed in the red light of sunset like a statue carved from smooth old ivory. She was completely nude, except that the light breeze wrapped the ends of her shining black hair (which hung like a dark cloak almost to the backs of her knees), carelessly about her hips. Her face was the most beautiful I have ever seen on a woman. Beautiful, that is, except for the evil in her bright eyes, and the cruelty in the smile of her scarlet lips.

But there was nothing beautiful about her to us—we knew that here was the thing we had hunted—that we had met at last with Placide's wife!

Nita stood, with that mocking smile, looking at us from between narrowed lids that slanted upward,

a little, at the corners. She seemed careless, and amused but I saw her nostrils twitch from where I stood. Like any other wild, naked thing of the woods! Her eyes opened suddenly wide, and they blazed with the same light I have seen in a cat's when she pounced upon a mouse. She waved one slim hand toward us in a swift, fierce gesture.

The woods were suddenly alive. Silent, grinning figures, some clad and some as naked as she, sprang at us from among the trees. Without waiting for a word from Gregory, our men blazed away, with shotguns and pistols. Gregory himself aimed squarely at Nita, and I saw his shotgun spit fire. Nita stood straining forward on her toes, watching as her pack closed with us, her lips drawn tightly back from her sharp, pointed teeth. I saw her laugh, horribly, as Gregory shot at her; then she sprang at him. He pumped buckshot from his gun at close range, but she merely gurgled with that horrible laughter, and leaped at him. After that, I was too busy with a shock-headed and foul-smelling old devil who flung himself on me, to bother with Gregory and Nita.

Nita's band numbered about the same as ours, but they had the strength of oxen. The thing with which I fought, for all his blazing red eyes and dripping mouth, looked like only a scrawny old man. But his hands were iron, and I

was helpless in his grip. It seemed that I was tangled in a web, and my arms and legs would not move as I wanted them to, after the old man glared into my eyes. It was like a nightmare, when you try to scream, to run, and cannot. Unable to do more than stare ahead with my eyes popping in fright, I felt the awful, reeking mouth of that ancient horror drooling upon my neck. Dimly, I heard Nita screaming, felt the cold lips draw back from my flesh. Nita's voice kept on, sounding as if she moved swiftly from one place to another. All about was a snarling, as of hungry beasts driven from their kills; then everything swam in in blackness.

My head cleared, after a minute, and I realized that I was being carried along through the forest, thrown over the shoulder of that old creature who stank, and who had fought me. I said he was old and scrawny; but he carried me as easily as a ten-pound sack of meal. We went through the woods as fast as a horse trots, the trampling of many feet keeping pace with us. I twisted my head about, trying to see.

We went through a dim open space; I twisted enough to look ahead of the dirty old one who carried me, and saw Nita, with Gregory slung on her back, leading the way as easily as though she ran unburdened. Around and

behind, the hell-pack ran with us. Each of them carried a man, and some of them seemed to be carrying double. All flitted through the woods, silently and lightly as dark shadows.

On we went, and I knew our direction more by instinct than otherwise, toward the southern end of the island, where the dank woods blend into the swamp that becomes a marsh, lying along the Gulf.

SOON WE WERE in the swamp. Often I heard the suck of soggy earth that clutched at hurrying feet; once scummy water splashed into my down-hung face, as the pack pattered through a shallow pool of smelly, stagnant water. All this time, until we finally came to a stop, I lay quietly over that old one's shoulder. His arms were about my legs like bands of steel, but not even the thought of struggle or escape came into my queerly dulled brain.

When the troop finally halted, I dimly saw that we were in the middle of a large piece of dry land, slightly higher than the swamp around it, and almost clear of trees. The old pig who carried me let me slip head first to the ground. Thanks to the soft ground, and none to him, my neck was not broken; it was bad enough at that.

I sat up and looked around that place. Other men, no doubt also dropped like sacks of onions,

were lying on the ground, or sitting looking stupid, like me. A few were getting groggily to their feet. Not much showed plainly in the dark, but there were other figures with eyes gleaming like wolves', standing over those on the ground, or getting in the way of the few who tottered on their feet. All of these with glowing eyes were half stretching their hands toward the ones they stood by, and at the same time, all looking eagerly at something near where I sat. I looked to see what it was they stared at so, and saw that Nita was standing there. Her eyes were glowing like yellow coals, and she had one hand out to steady Gregory on his feet. Then she waved her other hand lazily toward a clump of bushes, and the shadows with eyes pulled the figures upon the ground to their feet, and prodded them in that direction.

All at once, the knoll began to glow with a dim bluish light, like a wet match in the dark. It came from nowhere, you understand, and did not seem to light the swamp beyond the wide knoll. The light grew stronger, while my dirty old one pushed me along with the rest.

Nita led toward a covert of bushes almost in the middle of the knoll. Within these bushes, the blue light glowed stronger than anywhere else. Nita parted the growth and stepped through, lead-

ing Gregory. We pushed and jostled our way behind her.

WE SCRAMBLED through into a circular open place, in the center of which was a low mound of earth. Nita urged Gregory toward the mound, and gently forced him to sit. She herself leaped lightly up, and turned to face the rest of us, her body gleaming now like a silver column in the blue light. My old one pushed me closer, and the others crowded around. Nita looked us over carefully for a moment, before she spoke.

"There are two more than we are," she said, evidently talking for the benefit of her pack. "I will keep the man I have taken"—she motioned toward Gregory—"and also those other two . . ." She paused and leaned slightly forward, as the place hummed with angry murmurs and snarls of protest. Her eyes blazed from her narrowed lids, and she snarled back at them.

"Pigs and cattle! I say that three are mine! I am first among you, the mother of the pack, and I claim the right." Her gaze rested on me. "I will take that one," she said, pointing. The smelly old creature who had my arm tightened his grip until his hard, skinny fingers sank into my flesh.

"No!" he screeched; "I caught this one, and I keep him."

"Durand has two: take that one

from him." The old one followed the point of her finger, and observed a wolf-eyed one who held fast to a pair of our men. They were two young fellows out of our grubbing gang; and though they stood as quietly as terrified sheep in the clutch of the one Nita called Durand, they were both husky, full-blooded youngsters. My *sale vieux* peered at them, both so much larger and stronger than I, and grinned. Slobbering as he grinned, he pushed me toward Nita, and with a little squeal of satisfaction ran and pounced upon the nearest of the grubbers.

Nita coolly claimed a third captive, and the pack started to hustle the rest of our men out of the circular enclosure with sudden eagerness. Nita halted them with a sharp word.

"Wait!" she called, her hand upraised. The pack paused. "Remember," Nita continued, "there is a new one among us, who must have a grave that he cannot dig himself . . . Let the newcomers dig his—and *their own*!—before you . . . drink . . ." Then she waved them away.

MOST OF THE dullness that had numbed my wits cleared, with the transfer of that old thing's attention from me, and I suddenly observed one that I had not before noticed. I saw old Landry (he whom we had come to avenge!)

pushing from the place as eagerly as any of Nita's crew. One knotted hand gripped a staring, white-faced figure—a man he had worked beside, a few days before—that he regarded with greedy, blazing eyes! Landry was the recruit to whom Nita had referred!

The place was left bare of all except Nita and us three she had claimed: Gregory, myself, and a youngish fellow named Alcide Breaux. Nita bent and smiled into Gregory's eyes.

"I leave you for a little while," she told him; and it amused me, even then, because she said it as if it was something for Greg to regret. She stared into his eyes a moment more, and added, "Wait here, quietly, until I come back."

Stepping lithely down, she came over to me, a mocking smile upon her lips.

"So, *M'sieu'* Delacroix! We meet again!" She waited for me to answer, but I only stared at her, trying to put my finger on something that puzzled me.

"This time, you can not call for old Landry to come with his silver bullets—as you did another time, when I knocked at your door in the road camp! This little talk is different, yes?"

That was it! Her talk. Queer, is it not, how trifles occupy the mind at such times?

"Yes," I said; "*your* talk is a

whole lot different: the last time I heard you, your English, it was not so good."

"Aha, *M'sieu le Cajun*," she mocked, "your own is rather queer!" She smiled indulgently, and explained, "I am speaking my own language, the language spoken in the high mountains in a country far beyond the sea. You understand because I will it, and it seems to you that I speak a familiar tongue."

I shrugged, because I could think of nothing to say. Nita touched my chin with the tip of her finger, which was cold as the hand of Death. I bent my head under her touch so that I looked full into her dark eyes, that seemed to have points of flame dancing in their depths. Once more I began to feel dull and numb, and my wits grew sluggish. It was an effort to think, to concentrate. Nita lightly flipped my chin as she took away her finger.

"You amuse me—a very little, but still you amuse me," I heard her mocking voice in a kind of daze. "I think I shall leave you until later, and take this other oaf. Go sit upon my . . ." Whatever she was about to say, she checked it, and finished, "Go sit with Gregory."

With no thought to do otherwise, I went and sat down where she told me. Then I saw she was staring into Breaux's face as she

had into mine; but her smile was a terrible and ghoulish thing, while her eyes were like flaming pools of fire.

"Come!" she commanded, in a husky, quivering whisper. Obediently, though with a fleeting spasm of despair twitching his face, Breaux followed. He moved too slowly for Nita's liking, for she seized his arm and drew him with feverish eagerness across the clearing. Into the screening bushes, she pulled him. Nita fairly panted as she pushed poor Alcide through the growth, and I thought, dully, that her red mouth drooled. It is horrible when I think of it now; but I looked on without interest, then, as the bushes closed behind them, and Nita and Alcide . . . were gone . . .

HOW LONG GREGORY and I sat there alone, I have no idea. Neither of us spoke, and time seemed to stand still. It would have been too much effort to talk or move, or even lie back to rest. We kept motionless, I think, and waited; nothing at all mattered, until Nita suddenly came back and smiled down at us.

The fire had left her eyes, and she seemed younger, and *refreshed* . . . There was a smile of exhilaration on her beautiful red lips, redder now than before. I saw the tip of her tongue lick over those lips with satisfaction. Poor Alcide!

Nita dropped lazily down between us, smiling first at Gregory, then at me. "Don't be so dull-witted!" she reproved. She must have had some deliberate intention of lifting the spell that kept us so listless; for my brain cleared with her words, and I straightened as I sat. So did Gregory. Nita leaned toward him.

"Ah, that is better!" she breathed. "It has been long since any one except stupid, clod-like men, little better than brute beasts, came to this place." She reached out a hand, put it softly upon Greg's knee, her eyes, half closed, smoldering with a fire different from the fierce light that had flamed in them earlier in the evening. "There are other good things besides food and drink—warm, salty drink! This body of mine is still a woman's . . . Is it not fair?"

She leaned lazily back upon her hands and Gregory and I held our breaths together. Here was a gorgeous creature of pale ivory and ebony and scarlet. Pale ivory body, scarlet lips; and long loose hair as black and bewitching as sin.

God, she was beautiful! There was reason for Gregory to lean toward her, biting his lips—even though he knew, now, what sort of thing she was. Nita had said that she came from a far land: her old-ivory skin, with its hint of underlying olive tint, and the upward

slant of her eyes at the corners, told that she spoke the truth. The shameless creature lay back and laughed with brazen delight at Gregory's open fascination.

"Do you fine me beautiful?" she demanded naively. Sitting up quickly, she eagerly asked, "Do you like beautiful things?"

Gregory stared at her without answering, but there was something in his silence that seemed to please Nita as well as words. "Will you come to me willingly, Gregory, rather than as that one of your men I—had—tonight, without my arms and love to make—what happened—a caress and a promise of future delight in me? Will you take a love no mortal woman could give?"

Suddenly she struck the earth with one small hand. "Do you know what this is?" she demanded. Without waiting for answer, she told us, "It is where I lie and rest during the day—is it not in a good place, here in the heart of this swamp? No trappers or hunters come so far, and you will be safe with me." She laughed, with sudden malicious merriment.

"Old Placide, that dear husband of mine, showed me this place! There was a gypsy peddler who wanted both me and Placide's money he got for his land when oil was found on it, before I came to Labbranch and married him. The money was buried near our house,

but Placide was frightened of the peddler, and dug it up, and brought it here where he knew no one would ever come to look for it. I spied on him when he did it, and followed him here. Afterward, I remembered this place. His money is there now, at the head of my earthen couch!" She laughed gleefully again, but sobered quickly. She leaned toward Gregory, and her voice was vibrant with passion. Gregory half raised his hands, and her pale body writhed into his arms. I stared, you can imagine, with my mouth open: I was astonished at Nita, but I was ashamed of Gregory. I was thinking of poor Alcide, you understand!

Then, in a flash, I comprehended. Nita's wild mood fixed her interest on him, and Gregory played up to her, so she would not notice me. He was forcing himself to hold her close, swallowing his disgust to bend his head to those unclean red lips—so I might slip out and escape!

As Greg seized Nita in a sudden fierce grip that I thought was fine acting, I crept on hands and knees behind her back, toward that place through which she took Alcide. Creeping through the bushes, I came on something that caused me to jerk upright, scratching my face on the twigs around me. I looked down into the dead, staring face of Alcide, and shivered all over as I made the cross. Behind me was that

mound in the darkness, with a glow like phosphorus hanging around it and around two dark forms, so close together that they were like one . . .

NOT UNTIL that minute did I fully realize the awful nightmare of that place and the things that lived there. All my life I had heard tales of vampires and werewolves; I had listened to stories of Placide's wife, and how men had gone into this same swamp, and had not come back. True, I wondered, and I had been careful to keep in camp after sundown, since we had been on the island. But the tales had been tales, and this was something else. I felt the little silver medal hung on a cord around my neck, and whispered to all the saints I could remember. Heh! You can believe *that*!

Very carefully, I poked my head out and looked around. There was not much of a moon, and all I could see, at first, was those other mounds that covered the flat knoll. The bluish glow that had lighted up the place when we first came had died away; but there was that sort of phosphorous haze about some dark objects lying or hunkered up on all of them. In most cases, there were two of them on each mound — one lying across the other.

In a flash, I knew what those dark shapes were! One of each

pair was a man of our party; the other was the thing that owned the mound . . . It was horrible, I tell you! Those devils were lying there on our fellows, still and quiet, like dogs that have gorged on too much meat. Pff-f!

I remembered that I didn't have time to get sick at the stomach. You comprehend, I wanted to be going, to get away from there and bring back help to Gregory. The way we had come was mostly over a dry path through the swamp; I wondered if I could slip across the knoll and get back the same way. I started to find out, crawling on hands and knees, and holding my breath to keep from making a sound.

One of the mounds was close by, but I crawled past it without anything happening. After going a little farther, I saw that, whichever way I turned, there was nothing for it but to creep between two more. I went forward inch by inch, cold sweat running down into my eyes. But the things lying on the mounds kept lying there. They were so close together that I had to crawl near enough to see that the mounds were heaps of turned-up raw clods; there was an open hole to the side of them. Dully, I wondered how much trouble it was for the things to pull the dirt in on top of them, when they crawled in their holes at sun-up . . . My heart stood still when the one on my right

made a noise in its throat, and moved a little. But it was quiet, after that, and I crept on.

There was not much farther to go until I would be on the path through the swamp. One more heap of raw clods I had to pass; but there was a clump of those low bushes near it, that would hide me as I passed. I reached the bushes, when a low squeaking noise made me sink flat on my stomach. I listened, my ears strained like my nerves, and heard it again — it seemed to come from over my head. I looked up. The white skeleton of a dead cypress stood on the other side of that grave the bushes grew by. Hanging to the lowest limb of the dead tree was a black something that looked like a bat — only it couldn't be. But it was! A bat as big as one of those buzzards, hanging there by its feet, and making overgrown squeaks, as bats do in their sleep.

I went around the bushes, hugging the ground. I had that bat all figured out, you understand — there had been only *one* black splotch on those clods under the dead cypress!

The bat was too much on my mind. I didn't notice where I was going. Something moved, out there ahead of me. I had run right onto another one of those vampire nests — two glowing eyes glared into mine, and a great wolf-thing — that I knew was *no* wolf! — rose up from

on the other side of a hole, not twenty feet away!

The wolf snarled; I could see the gleam of its teeth in the dim moonlight. I knew that I was caught, that I had to run for it. There was no use in waiting there for that thing to come slobbering at my throat. The swamp was right ahead of me. I jumped up and dashed for it; and that wolf howled and dashed after me!

NEVER DID I go anywhere as fast as I went from that place. The howls of the wolf behind me roused the knoll; a dozen howls answered, as if that many of the vampires took up the chase in the form of wolves. I had no thought of path, now; but plunged in blind fear through the swamp. Once more I felt of the little silver medal of the Virgin hung around my neck; I felt it while I called silently on all the saints I could remember.

The wolf panted at my heels, and only my terrible fright kept me ahead of it for so long. It was bound to catch me — I could almost feel its hot breath on my back. I whirled, just as the beast put on an extra spurt, to spring at my shoulders. What good my bare hands could have done against that slaving terror, I can not imagine; but I threw them out, instinctively.

Something strange happened. One clenched hand had torn the blessed little medal from its cord

around my neck. That was pure accident; and it was also accident that I cast that medal straight into the open maw of the mad beast as it sprang at me. For one terrible instant I felt the hot stinking breath of the thing in my face. Then it dropped down, bucking and making choking noises in its throat.

Whether the holiness of the little medal had anything to do with it, or whether it was a plain case of the wolf-thing choking on it, I neither knew nor cared. The main thing was for me to go on while the going was good; and I did.

Suddenly out of the darkness behind me came a furious squeaking, and something beat at my head, scratching my cheek. It was a great bat, like the one I had seen hanging to the dead cypress; and another joined it. Their little eyes blazed like red fires of hate, and the wings that beat at me were as heavy as a man's arms. They beat me down on my knees in the mud. The howling of the vampire wolves from the knoll came closer and closer through the swamp.

Without thinking, I dug handfuls of the soft mud at my knees, flinging the slimy stuff into the squeaking faces of the monster bats. It seemed to annoy them, for they squeaked furiously and darted up out of reach. I used the second before they swooped back, to spring to my feet and stagger on. Then they were on me again,

their heavy wings battering at my head, the claws on the wings scratching my face until the blood ran down onto my neck. A great, fire-eyed owl swooped suddenly down and joined the bats. The werewolves were so close that I saw their dark forms, their flaming eyes; and there were other dark shapes running with them, like men, but with eyes that blazed like theirs.

I felt the clinging mud beneath my feet go thin, become water that wet my ankles. I could go no farther; the heavy wings pounded at my head, and I slipped and fell sprawling. Half choked with slimy water, I lay as I fell, lifting my head only to clear my nose and mouth. The water slowly crawled against my chin. Too exhausted to get up, or even to move or put my arms over my head to keep off those terrible wings, I waited without hope for an awful end.

NOTHING HAPPENED. The wolves came dashing up, so close that I heard their panting, between yelps and snarling frowls. Turning over on one elbow, I looked back and wondered. There were the wolves, whimpering and slaving, not more than a couple of yards from my feet; and the red-eyed things in the shapes of men snarled there with them. In the air a half-dozen of the bats whirled and squeaked, and a pair

of huge black owls with fiery eyes like saucers whirled with them. But none of the swooping things passed over my head; none of the whining pack sprang at me!

Suddenly I knew what held them back. Years and years before, some one had sunk what was hoped to be an oil well, on this part of the island. The well came in, flowing nothing but salt water, and was left there with even the casing being pulled. After all these years, a little water still flows occasionally from that old well, and seeps through the swamp to the bayou. I lay in water that flowed, however shallow and sluggish—*and those vampires could not cross or enter running water, nor even fly above it!*

As long as I lay there I was safe! But I could not lie there until morning sent the devil pack scampering to its holes, because of Gregory. I must get back to him before it was too late. I knew that old well was not far from the fork of the bayou nearest Labbranch. The things that whined for my blood could not follow except by scampering all the way around the head of that blessed water. Perhaps I could beat them to the bayou bank. Well, I would try! So!

I staggered to my feet, shaking my fist at the things like men and wolves that yowled their helpless hate at me, and at those other things that hooted and squeaked,

swooping above them through the trees.

I HAD MY breath back now, was no longer weak and panting. Splashing out of the water, I started for the bayou as fast as my legs would take me. The thirsting things behind me yelped and raced off to round the old well, and so come at me again. God, how I ran! And thanked heaven as I ran, that there was not much except solid ground under my feet, so far, nor much undergrowth to slow my pace.

On I went, until I began to pant for breath again. Hope of reaching the bayou rose, for I knew it could not be much farther away, and I had not yet heard any more of the howling devils on my track. Just as I was about to slow down and take it easier, I heard them again, yelping in the distance but coming like the rush of wind. On I staggered; on to the bayou. I could sense the nearness of the saving stream, now. Two hundred yards ahead through the darkness . . . a hundred . . .

Silently, without warning, the bats swarmed out of the swamp at my back. They came in a cloud, great devil owls with the monster bats, swooping, beating again at my head. I struggled on, on . . .

The wolves came up; close behind them padded the things like men with eyes of fire. There were

so many that they were in one another's way; and that was all that saved me from being torn to pieces at once. The great bats beat me with their wings, and tore at my face with hooked claws. One of the men vampires seized my wrist. This time, I knew that my end had surely come.

It was horrible to die like that, and with the bayou so near—horrible to die an unclean death from which I would rise up to be one of those things that howled for my blood! I went mad for a moment, and fought with such fury that I held them off a little longer, screaming as I fought. And then—even in my madness, I heard what it was that made those snarling things fall back and stand quivering, listening: I had screamed—and the cries of many men answered from near by in the swamp!

Even while we stood frozen, those fiends and I together, points of light showed faintly, moving through the trees. Lights—lanterns!—and the voices of men!

"Help!" I cried. "This way—help!"

Again my cry was answered; and some one fired three shots, as if they were a signal. Farther off, the baying of hounds sounded, and three rapid, answering shots.

The things around me, all but one of the werewolves, turned and rushed to meet the men who were

running up with lights. The lone beast sprang in to finish me, but I fought so desperately, now that help was near, that it could not get at my throat. It knocked me from my feet, and we rolled and fought on the ground. I knew there could be but one end to this business; but shots rang out from close at hand, and yelps and howls mingled with shouts and curses of me. There was something—something of surprize and fear and pain—in the howls that made the beast leave off its slashing at me. It sprang back, bristling, its red eyes glaring redder than ever. Suddenly it let out one howl of its own, and raced to join the pack.

STAGGERING TO my feet, I saw that a mad fight was on, there among the trees. Dark figures blazed away with guns that spit fire in the murk; others stabbed at wolf and bat and red-eyed vampires in the shapes of men, with pointed wooden stakes. Every time a gun roared, there would be a shriek of agony, and a bat-thing would fall thudding to the ground; a wolf would spring high into the air, yowling its hate; or a thing like a man with blazing eyes would scream and fall writhing.

But the guns were few, and the men with stakes were not having things all their own way. Some of them fell, and I don't like to remember it. The vampires greatly

outnumbered the others, you understand. But the baying of hounds came nearer and nearer. The dogs themselves burst into view, furious and eager to join the fight. They rushed in—and yelped with sudden terror when they found what things they had to fight. Here were creatures no dogs could stand against. The poor beasts turned and fled!

But other men followed the dogs; and two of these had guns that joined the few already roaring. Now the odds changed; and suddenly something else happened. Except for maybe a dozen that were lying still on the ground—there were *no* vampires! The bats shot off through the trees; wolves streaked into the bushes; the things that looked like men faded into a gust of wind that swept away into the swamp!

I stumbled forward, and some one came to meet me. It was Sheriff Desarde.

"Hey, you, Delacroix!" he cried, "what's happened down here? Where's Gregory and the rest of your fellows?" Somebody had a canteen of water, and handed it to me. I gulped half of it down my dry throat before I started urging the sheriff toward that knoll where I had left Gregory with Nita. Tired as I was, I thought I could guide the sheriff and his men back over the way I had escaped, and I was in a hurry

to go. I told Desarde what had taken place, in as few words as possible, and we set off at double time.

"They'll know we're coming, and not all of them were here," I warned the sheriff. Desarde was confident.

"I was in Baton Rouge this morning," he told me as we went, "and Legendre"—Rene Legendre is his chief deputy, you understand—didn't know what to do when Gregory's men came in with his note about old Jules Landry's disappearance, and saying he was going to go into the swamp and round up the 'gypsies'. I got back to town just before another man came in from your camp, saying you fellows hadn't come back. It was seven o'clock then, and I knew what had happened—I was a grown man when Placide Duboin married that Nita, and I know as much about her as anybody!

"I got a gunsmith to jerk the lead out of enough bullets for a half-dozen guns, and put silver in them, instead. That was all we had time to wait for; so I gave the rest of them some poles I had, already sharpened, ready to stake out some pole beans I'm growing; we took them by the church and wet them plenty, in the font of holy water . . . I got a pint flask of holy water on my hip, too."

You can believe me, I was glad the sheriff was born in this

country, and had more sense about some things than men who thought they were a lot smarter—Gregory, for instance! So!

WE CAME TO the knoll, all right; and a lot quicker than I had been in getting away. The place was dark, but we could see red eyes glaring at us out of the blackness. The vampires were there waiting for us, ready to fight for their nest.

"Gregory!" Desarde shouted; "where are you?" There was no answer, either then or when the sheriff yelled again louder. We hesitated, and Desarde called for all the men with lanterns to bring them to the front. Then something swept down at us, and sharp claws raked my face. The sheriff cursed and fired at something that slashed at his own head. It was like a signal; the fight was on.

Something snarled and rushed at me. There was a lantern on the ground in back of me, and I recognized, with satisfaction, the old devil who had brought me to the knoll in the first place. I had one of the stakes Desarde had brought, and it was pointed like a toothpick. I jabbed the old one in the stomach with it. He howled and hopped back, but started for me again.

"Aho, *sale vieux!*" I told him; "You want a better one, I see—

well, take it!" And I drove it at his breast with all my strength. Uh-h! Did you ever drive a sharp pole into anybody's chest, vampire or otherwise? Neither did I, until then, but you comprehend that it was not nice . . . the way he *crunched!*

(Wait till I get a drink on that! You . . . ? Oh, very well then! You never pushed a sharp pole into anything that crunched and squalled!)

Well! That old fellow flopped down like a bundle of rags. I pulled my stake out of him and jabbed up at a bat's stomach. It squealed and wheeled away. Snarling and growling things fought all over the place. The lanterns on the ground made just enough light to see a little; some of them were overturned and broken.

A wolfish shape sprang snarling into my face. I jabbed at it with my pole and missed, and then I was down. Desarde's gun roared, and the *loupe-garou* went limp on top of me. I pushed it off and scrambled up. The sheriff was blazing away only whenever he was sure of a hit; he had none of the silver bullets to waste. Suddenly the fight died away. There was nothing there for us to fight! As before, the vampire pack had melted into the forest.

"Now," I reminded, "we find Gregory—and Nita!"

Desarde called a half-dozen men

to bring lanterns, and told the rest to hurry and surround the knoll, and be on the lookout for a return of the pack. I rushed to the mound where I had left Nita and Gregory, the sheriff and the men with lanterns running with me. Not sure of what to expect, but in fear that Nita had run into the swamp with her pack, I pushed through the bushes.

WHATEVER I THOUGHT to find, it was not what the lanterns at my back showed. Gregory was on his knees, holding tight to Nita, who struggled and fought in his arms like a wild thing. Silent, panting, she clawed at his face, and he hunched his chin tight on her shoulder to protect himself from her sharp teeth.

"Stop fighting," Gregory pleaded, "these are my friends, and they won't hurt you."

"Let me go, fool!" Nita screamed at him. "*Let me go!*"

Why she was not able to fade from his arms and whisk herself away, what had passed between her and Gregory that may have made her powerless in his arms, I do not know. But Gregory held tight to her, though she screamed now and fought like a mad thing. Desarde brushed past me.

"Let her loose, Greg!" the sheriff cried—"Move out of the way and I'll quiet her with a silver bullet."

Tales of Wonder

THE PYGMY PLANET

by
Jack Williamson

THE CITY OF SLEEP

by
Laurence Manning

PLANE PEOPLE

by
Wallace West

ECHO

by
William F. Temple

don't miss issue #5

**FAMOUS
SCIENCE FICTION**

Nita screamed louder; the howls of her pack ranged in closer. Gregory jerked his head around at us, unmindful that Nita seized the opportunity to bite savagely at his exposed neck.

"No!" he cried, in startled alarm. "She's mine from now on—I'll take care of her, and you won't have to worry about her, now. Go away and let us alone!"

What do you know about that? I thought Gregory was playing up to Nita so she wouldn't watch me, and I could get away—and he meant it, all along! He had actually fallen for that bloodsucking *thing*! He put his body between her and Desarde, and managed to stagger to his feet with her kicking in his arms.

The sheriff thought Gregory was crazy. So did I, as far as that goes, and I think so, now—no man could take a vampire in his arms and keep sane! Desarde was afraid to fire at Nita, for fear of hurting Gregory. He seemed to have a sudden idea; for I saw him grab at his hip pocket.

"Let's see what this'll do!" he muttered, pulling out the flask of holy water. "I can sprinkle this on both of them."

He slopped the water from the uncorked bottle on the pair, wetting Gregory as much as Nita. Greg started away with her, taking long steps and not seeming to mind the water; but she

shrieked and howled, twisting as if Desarde had poured acid on her.

"Close in!" the sheriff cried to us. "Take her away from him and let's finish this!"

Gregory heard him, and began to run toward the swamp with Nita. Desarde started to jump after him. Then, with out any warning, Nita's pack burst onto the knoll from out of the woods, and hell broke loose again. Howling, snarling and squeaking, fiends like wolves and bats and men flung themselves upon us, and between us and the poor fool who carried the mistress of them all.

We were hard pressed for a minute, and two of our men went down and never got up. Poor fellows! But heavy odds were with us in point of numbers, since we had killed at least a dozen in the first two fights; and there were still a few silver bullets in the guns. The vampires gave way, and then we realized that they were really beaten, and only fought to keep us away from Gregory and Nita.

We punched and jabbed with the sharpened stakes; now and then a gun blazed, whenever a sure shot offered. The blackness of the swamp was beginning to take on a gray tinge. Under the threat of dawn, the howls of the things became uneasy. We pushed on after Gregory with less resistance. The light grew, and we could see him

staggering along ahead. Nita sagged limp and dangling in his arms.

The things swirling around us, just out of reach, began to change their snarls to whimpers. Two of them ran up to Gregory, fluttering around him like two frightened old women. He shook them off and tottered on. On toward the banks of the bayou, that showed through the grayness, not far away.

There was sudden silence around us, for a moment. Snarls and whimpers hushed. Then, as if at a signal, the vampire pack raced away behind us.'

UNDERSTANDING flashed through my brain; and it was queer how I felt a little touch of pity for those things. They could not face the sun, and scampered away to their holes, where we would find them with our stakes before another night . . .

Gregory stood swaying, facing us with his back to the bayou. We came slowly closer, seeing that his face was drawn and weary. He carried dead weight that must have felt like lead in his arms; Nita hung limp, moaning.

"Get back! Gregory demanded hoarsely. "You can't shoot me, and I won't let you touch her. I'm too tired for it, but if you come closer, I'll jump in the bayou and try to swim across with her. If I drown, it'll be the same as if you murdered me."

Desarde stepped slowly forward empty hands outstretched, intending to try reasoning with him. Gregory misunderstood, turned to jump, even while the sheriff cried to him to wait. Nita jerked suddenly to life, shrieking as she saw the water under them.

"No!" she screamed. For a fraction of a second, while Gregory tottered on the bank, she bit and clawed, and fought to tear his arms away. Desarde ran toward them, and we with him. But we were too late. Nita gave one last awful scream of fear, as Gregory toppled with her to the water . . .

There was a blinding flash, a blue-white sheet of flame that burned up the air we breathed. It burned to the back of our eyeballs. For long minutes we stood there, arms across our eyes, blinded, and afraid to move. Finally that passed, and we could see again. But there was nothing upon the surface of the bayou; the black water flowed on as it always had: creeping darkly toward the bay. What happened, or how, I don't pretend to know. Nor why. But all my life I've heard it said, *vampires can cross no flowing water!* Gregory had tried to take Nita . . . And that flame; and they were gone . . .

God! Let's have a drink!

I AM INTERESTED in folklore, and had listened to Delacroix more for that reason than

any other. Otherwise, I can not explain why my patience burst bounds no sooner.

"I don't want a drink, and you've already had too many." I was angry and let him have it straight. "I heard talk in the town about a wild fight the sheriff's posse had with a gang of gypsies on the island; and then you waste my time with a version that would make Munchausen green with envy."

Delacroix laughed shortly. "You don't expect the people who know the truth to tell it to outsiders, do you? And be called crazy, or liars like you're calling me?"

"Anyway," I retorted, "you'd better sober up and be on the job, in the morning. If your past record wasn't unusually good, I'd fire you now!"

"Oh!" Delacroix exclaimed innocently, "I forgot to tell you: When we went back to the knoll to take care of what was left to do, I hung back and did some private

digging of my own! Old Placide's money was there, just as Nita said . . ."

Reaching into a pocket, he drew out a wallet. As he carelessly flipped the contents with his thumb, a sheaf of old currency showed for a minute, like the open corner of a fan. The bills were faded and dirty, and their size proved them of old-fashioned issue. Old and soiled they may have been, but the four numerals in their corners seemed very vivid to my startled eyes.

"Just a tin box and a little oilskin-wrapped pack of greenbacks," Delacroix observed. "But *big* ones! *So!* The only reason I'm here is because I can't get a train to New Orleans for a couple more hours . . ."

"You better have a drink before you go? All right! Whether you do, or whether you don't"—he looked up, his grin taking the malice from his parting shot—"you take your job and go hop in the bayou—and see what happens to *you!*"



Coming Next Issue

The street noises of Times Square changed abruptly. The traffic tumult changed. Brakes squealed swiftly. A cop's police-whistle blew. There was an indecisive, milling confusion among the folk on foot. Then another Monster appeared.

This one came out of nowhere, slithering agilely . . . It was a great bulk fifteen feet in diameter with legs of incredible vastness. It was a spider . . . And then something huge tumbled clumsily . . . and spread colossal wings to break its fall, and bounced hugely from the sidewalk . . . It was a beetle, green in color, but obscenely fat. It writhed and wriggled crazily, getting itself upright again, while motorcars stopped with smoking tires to keep from running into it—because its bulk was that of a moving-van. It heaved itself erect and began to walk down the middle of Seventh Avenue in an extraordinary, machine-like preoccupation, its antennae moving weirdly, its ghastly mandibles outstretched before it.

Then the panic really began. The motored traffic fled. The humans ran screaming . . . But a few—a very few—people looked upward at the beat of mighty wings, and saw a butterfly, vaster than any man-created aircraft soaring past in the glow of lights below . . .

The Monsters

by Murray Leinster



The Years Are As A Knife

by Robert E. Howard

The years are as a knife against my heart.
Of what avail the labor and the sweat,
To hammer on the anvil men call art,
A soulless, gleaming tinsel, sparkling wet
With drops of salty blood, black agony
Has wrung from out the gagging soul of me.

Better the silence and the long black rest;
Better the gray grass growing through my brain—
Far better to be done with this unrest,
The hope, the horror, pleasure and the pain.
Life is a liar and a drear-eyed whore—
Death has his hand upon a silent Door.

What if I tear the wings from shiftY Fame,
Or, swine-like, wallow in a waste of gold?
Oh, hollow, hollow, hollow, men's acclaim,
And silver never warmed a heart grown cold.
Better the shot, the fall, the growing stain,
Than one long blindness, shot with crimson pain.

Before I left my cradle—at my birth—
My road was laid and every thorn was strown;
My heritage is the waste lands of the earth,
My heart strings tuned to one long changeless groan.
Before I saw the light of day, my cup
With wormwood, gall and venom was filled up.

I quail with terror to the coming years—
Oh, Christ, my way is long and gloomy-black;
Oceans I see of brine and tearing tears,
And iron thorns that mail a bitter track.
Better the leap, and blackness suddenly,
Than one long road of endless agony.

I feel a wind that chills me to the bone,
And dark the clouds that veil my reeling path;
And I must charge a citadel of stone,
And batter Titans with a spear of lath!
I am an ant that spins across the world,
By heedless winds dismembered, flung and hurled.

Not only on the cross the Son of Man
Rent blackened heavens with a futile pain—
His days of agony were short in span,
But I am doomed to live and writhe in vain.
But who shall gag me on the bitter crust?
Even such brains as mine may crash to dust.

Inquisitions

TRAVELLERS BY NIGHT

14 . Never-Before Published Tales
of the Macabre
edited by August Derleth

Arkham House Publishers, Sauk
City Wisconsin 53583; 1967; 261pp;
\$4.00.

Contents: *The Cicerones*, by Robert Aickman; *Episode on Cain Street*, by Joseph Payne Brennan; *The Cellars*, by J. Ramsey Campbell; *The Man Who Rode the Trains*, by Paul A. Carter; *A Handful of Silver*, by Mary Elizabeth Counselman; *Denkirch*, by David Drake; *The Wild Man of the Sea*, by William Hope Hodgson; *The Unpleasantness at Carver House*, by Carl Jacobi; *The Terror of Anerly House School*, by Margery Lawrence; *The Horror from the Middle Span*, by H.P. Lovecraft; *Not There*, by John Metcalfe; *Family Tree*, by Frank D. Thayer, Jr.; *Death of a Bumblebee*, by H. Russell Wakefield; *The Crater*, by Donald Wandrei.

The book jacket describes this collection as "an anthology of new horror stories", but it seems to me that the subtitle on the first flyleaf, which I have quoted above, is a more just description of the contents, just as the subheadings in this magazine

"Bizarre, Gruesome, Frightening" gives a better hint of its contents than the work "horror" alone. That is, every item in this collection can be said to fit in some way into the description "macabre"—but all fourteen of these tales cannot rightly be called "horror" stories.

This aside, the first thing to note is that all fourteen of the entries show writing skill above the average—none falls below—and a fair number are very well written indeed.

Six of the fourteen strike me as being entirely satisfactory, and we will consider these first.

The Wild Man of the Sea, by William Hope Hodgson, is the story for which I have to stretch the term "macabre" farthest in order to allow that it belongs in this collection. Some readers will not agree. But nonetheless, this story has a spell and an all-around rightness about it which puts it in top position for me—despite the author's occasional use of terms (such as "callow youth") which were clichés even at the time he wrote it. It is a horrifying story without being a horror story, and also a tale of great strength and beauty, worthy of inclusion in a collection of memorable sea stories; and to say this, of course, is to say that it goes beyond the boundaries of any categorizing.

The Cellars, by J. Ramsey Campbell, excels in the author's imaginative use of language—there is nothing tired about his images and metaphors; all are fresh and vivid—and the subtle manner in which horror is revealed. The experienced reader will not be taken by surprise (this is possible but rarely in contemporary horror fiction, and I would say that none of the stories here are likely to surprise the veteran reader) but pleasure comes through the author's working out of his theme, so that we are left with the proper feeling even if there is no unexpected close-up which makes one gasp.

The Man Who Rode the Trains, by Paul A. Carter is another quiet, but vivid piece, where the working-out adds up to satisfaction and leaves a feeling of uneasiness in the reader.

The Unpleasantness at Carver House, by Carl Jacobi, manages to achieve a high level of suspense even though you will most likely see the ending coming from a distance. In some (no, not some, alas—many) stories, the lack of full explanation for some events would be evidence of the author's ineptitude; here it is solid proof of skill. The reader is invited to speculate, and since these matters are not such upon which the resolution of the story depends, it makes for on-going fascination after reading.

The Terror at Anerly House School, by Margery Lawrence manages to infuse enough freshness into a frequently-employed theme so that there is no temptation to skim to the final encounter.

And *Not There*, by John Metcalfe is macabre in a rather amusing way—but not in the slapstick manner.

Two stories, *The Cicerones*, by Robert Aickman and *The Crater*, by Donald Wandrei, miss fire for me; but both are so well written and vivid, both authors proceeding with such apparent sureness, that I am willing to allow that it may be my head, rather than the book, which produces the hollow sound.

A Handful of Silver, by Mary Elizabeth Counselman, is a special case. There is so much that is good in it, that I suspect it may be my own special familiarity with the theme in its previous permutations that makes me feel it is all too obvious nearly from the start. I do think it was a mistake to put the final phrase into italics, as if this revelation would knock the reader out of his seat, as it were. Perhaps some readers will be surprised, but I should be astonished if very many who purchase this volume are at all surprised.

The other five stories I do not find quite satisfactory, for various reasons.

Episode on Cain Street, by Joseph Payne Brennan, does not miss for me so much because it is patterned after a particular Lovecraft story (ringing a somewhat interesting variation upon it) but that so much of it reads like ceremonial gestures of the Lovecraft imitator. Everything about the story has an overfamiliar ring to anyone who has read HPL's short stories and letters, articles about Lovecraft, etc. In short, this story could "go" with the person who knows Lovecraft very little or not at all—but not with the well-tempered Arkham House addict.

Denkirch, by David Drake, has a fault common to many stories of this

nature: after many pages of introduction, (fifteen here), something happens—but that something is presented cursorily, and it is the same sort of thing that has happened again and again and again. It is as if the author had to meet a deadline, or was limited to a certain length, and found that he had used up just about all the allotted time or space with preliminaries, so had to chop it off quickly. Which is just what he does.

The Horror from the Middle Span is a Lovecraft idea, or fragment, or sketch, or whatever, completed by August Derleth. Mr. Derleth manages to maintain the feeling of this "Dunwich" tale, but there is quite a bit that, I feel, HPL would have worked out more thoroughly (the telescope, the symbols in the room, etc.) and again I get the feeling that either time or space was pressing, so that this tale had to be wound up fast. (There is nothing wrong with the proportion, here, though; it's just that expansion, rather than compression, is what the theme called for.)

And Derleth achieves verisimilitude in the Lovecraft style by perpetuating one of HPL's most tiresome faults—continually harping upon the local yokels as "superstitious", to the point where it becomes virtually a twitch on the part of the narrator, or a ceremonial gesture like crossing oneself. This is information (correct or incorrect) which the narrator wants to get across; but actually telling the reader twice is once too many, though a single repetition might be tolerable. And it isn't that HPL used labels as a substitute for showing the reader and letting him see for himself; Lovecraft *did* show the reader. Unfortunately he was infatuated

with a period of literature wherein writers felt it necessary to tell their readers that something unpleasant was horrible, something wicked was evil, etc., no matter how well they illustrated their texts. (And perhaps for them it *was* necessary, in order to convince a public suspicious of fiction that these stories had high moral tone and were edifying as well as entertaining.) Certainly, however, fiction written for a small and generally sophisticated market does not need the amenities needed when one writes for toddlers.

Family Tree, by Frank Thayer, Jr., just doesn't come off. It's a compendium of over-familiar devices (the decaying house that presents an aura of evil; the hinted-at monstrosity of a member of the family; the local yokels fearing to go near the place; the library full of arcane material; the chalk marks on the floor, etc.) and has a nicely gruesome final sentence (in italics, of course). But I'm nowise convinced that some other gruesome final sentence would not have fit the preceding material just as well, and the preceding material (though better written than many other such exhibits) remains a crashing bore. Only an "inevitable" finale, fully justified by what was given before, and containing some elements of surprise, would work here. This one does contain a modicum of astonishment—but not the feeling that if one had been just a little more alert, one would have been at least suspicious of the object in question. Actually, one is given no reason to suspect anything at all in particular—just to feel that something awful is going to happen somehow.

If I say that I find *Death of a*

Bumblebee, by H. Russell Wakefield the most unsatisfactory story in the volume, that is partly because of my feeling that it could have been fully equal to the best story. Right up to the ending (and I have no quarrel with the essence of the author's conclusion) there is a feeling that these fascinating relationships are going to be worked out to a catastrophe—but that is exactly what doesn't happen. We are cheated. Our interest is aroused in many facets of character complexity here; then, as if the author had grown tired of it, the ending is slapped down upon it. So what we have here is a well-disguised shaggy dog story—disguised, because the conventional shaggy dog story (brought to perfection by the late

Cyril Kornbluth) is supposed to be rather dull, though continually promising to become interesting in the next quarter hour or so. It's frustrating to realize that if the author repents and reworks this story, we won't see it in this world, because he isn't here any more.

Not having read the two previous collections of new stories edited by Mr. Derleth for Arkham House (*Dark Mind, Dark Heart*—15 tales: \$4.00; *Over the Edge*—18 tales: \$5.00), I have no idea how *Travelers at Night* may compare with its predecessors. But it does seem to me that those who enjoy the sort of macabre fiction that editor Derleth is partial to will get their money's worth out of this one. RAWL

Follow The Big Four In Fiction

for tales bizarre and frightening

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STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES

for tales of wonder

FAMOUS SCIENCE FICTION

for daring tales of action

WORLD-WIDE ADVENTURE

It Is Written...

One of the drawbacks of bi-monthly publication is that I have to work farther ahead than I did when we were quarterly. It was possible that a few letters relating to the prior issue might come in while I was preparing departments for the new one. Now, there's no such possibility; I'm writing this on Bastille Day, 1967—some three weeks before the November issue of MOH is due to appear on sale. And, of course, we can no longer publish a reckoning on the prior issue in the new one; it will have to relate to two issues back, at the very least. If it turns out to be necessary to make this three issues back, in order to give you active readers a fair chance to get your ballots in, then we'll do just that; should no "Reckoning" appear this time, you'll know I've done it.

Edward S. Lauterbach writes from Purdue University: "Further confirmation of Sam Moskowitz's bibliographical detective work concerning Frank Aubrey is given in the *British Museum General Catalogue of Printed Books*, 1965, where Frank Aubrey

is listed as the pseudonym of Frank Atkins. The same information was listed as early as 1934 in the first edition of the BM catalogue, and it is likely that Frank Atkins is the author's real name.

"Let me congratulate you on the success of what I call your 'revival pulp'. By reprinting the material you do in *MAGAZINE OF HORROR*, *STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES*, and *FAMOUS SCIENCE FICTION* you recreate the nostalgic era of pulp publishing for readers who grew up during the 1920s and 1930s and give the younger generation an idea of the best writing in the old weird and science fiction pulps. Perhaps 'resurrection pulps' would be a better term for MOH, SMS, and FSF, for you do dig up many old friends from the graveyard of pulp literature and give them new life in your magazines."

Don Thompson writes from Mentor, Ohio; "'Every school child knows' that King Arthur got his sword (unnamed, so far as I can

recall) from a stone and anvil to become king. Shame on both you and Sam Moskowitz.

"Other than that, MOH #17 was a fine issue. I'd still like to see the magazine that you could put out with a higher budget—you do a great job without one."

Some times, alas, grown-ups forget what every school child knows. Apparently Moskowitz did, and I know for sure that I did at the time I read his introduction. Apologies all around.

Making bricks with very little straw requires particular skill; the question is whether such skill is compatible with the knack of making bricks with lots of straw. It could be, but I wouldn't take it for granted.

Marie Greenberg writes from Lynbrook, New York: "OK, you asked for it! As a devout follower of your magazine and stories such as you publish, I would like you to know that I enjoy and read your publications regularly. *However!* May I register a complaint or two?

"#1: Why are there so few stories in each issue? Only six in the Fall edition. Most of the other magazines of this type contain, at the very least, ten to twelve stories.

"#2: Why the *Editor's Page*? Why *The Reckoning*? We could have a short story in this space.

"#3: How come back issues are the same price as current issues? Shouldn't they be sold for less?

"C'mon, let's have more stories and less accounts of back issues (titles, etc.). The *Editor's Page* and *The Reckoning* are, as far as I am concerned, useless!

"If there are issues available as far back as 1965, I would be interested—but not a 50c per copy.

"Please don't think I'm a crab! I work in a TV repair shop and sit at a desk for six hours daily, and have plenty of time to read. Your magazine tops my list, but I feel let-down because I get through it so fast!

"Cheer up! I still love you."

And, of course, I love to be loved! So I'll answer your questions as clearly as I can.

#1: We could indeed have ten to twelve stories per issue if I just forgot about the longer ones, such as *The Curse of Amen-Ra*, or *Wolves of Darkness*, which was still longer. More readers seem to want long stories, with a leaven of shorter ones, rather than a longer contents page which would eliminate the long ones. The question is open; if enough readers agree with you, then it's my job to alter the policies according to what is wanted.

#2: *The Editor's Page*, *The Reckoning*, etc. are departments which take some extra work on the editor's part, so if a decided majority of the active readers indicated that they would rather see the magazine completely devoted to fiction instead, I'd be saved that work. And while my own feeling is that these departments (which *are* considered expendable when a story would be crowded out by them) give the magazine personality, my feelings would be put aside if the votes went against them.

#3: Old magazines in this field tend to sell for more, rather than less, than new magazines, all depend-

ing upon supply and demand. Every issue we publish reaches a number of readers who have never seen or heard of MOH before (or have been out of touch because they moved to an area where they could not find it on sale), and there is a constant demand for back issues, as well as a constant interest in the contents of the old issues. Some readers want as complete a set as they can get; others want particular stories and authors; still others would like a set, but want favorite stories or authors first. That is why we keep the listings going—so many readers appreciate them.

And really, if the current issue is worth 50c when it is on the newsstand, because the stories are good ones, ones you want to read, then the contents are not going to go bad just because the issue is no longer on sale.

Back in 1931 the Clayton Magazines charged 50c for back numbers of *ASTOUNDING STORIES OF SUPER SCIENCE*, dated 1930. (The cover price was 20c.) The other fantastic magazines, *AMAZING STORIES* (monthly and quarterly) *WONDER STORIES* (monthly and quarterly) and *WEIRD TALES* only charged the cover price for back issues. But no one cut the cover price.

You didn't say whether you consider *It Is Written* . . . useless, too; but I assume that you do. Yet, were we to drop it, then hardly anyone would bother to write in (why, I can't say; but I've noticed throughout the years that when weird or science fiction magazines stopped publishing letters, the volume of mail they received fell off drastically—and not just letters from readers who wanted

Have You Missed These Issues?

#1, August 1963: *The Man With a Thousand Legs*, Frank Belknap Long; *A Thing of Beauty*, Wallace West; *The Yellow Sign*, Robert W. Chambers; *The Maze and the Monster*, Edward D. Hoch; *The Death of Halpin Frayser*, Ambrose Bierce; *Babylon: 70 M.*, Donald A. Wollheim; *The Inexperienced Ghost*, H. G. Wells; *The Unbeliever*, Robert Silverberg; *Fidel Bassin*, W. J. Stamper; *The Last Dawn*, Frank Lillie Pollock; *The Undying Head*, Mark Twain.

#2, November 1963: *The Space-Eaters*, Frank Belknap Long; *The Faceless Thing*, Edward D. Hoch; *The Red Room*, H.G. Wells; *Hungary's Female Vampire*, Dean Lipton; *A Tough Tussle*, Ambrose Bierce; *Doorslammer*, Donald A. Wollheim; *The Electric Chair*, George Waight; *The Other One*, Jerry L. Keane; *The Charmer*, Archie Binns; *Clarissa*, Robert A. W. Lowndes; *The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes*, Rudyard Kipling.

#3, Feb. 1964: *Out of print.*

#4, Sept. 1964: *Out of print.*

#5, September 1964: *Cassius*, Henry S. Whitehead; *Love at First Sight*, J. L. Miller; *Five-Year Contract*, J. Vernon Shea; *The House of the Worm*, Merle Prout; *The Beautiful Suit*, H. G. Wells; *A Stranger Came to Reap*, Stephen Dentinger; *The Morning the Birds Forgot to Sing*, Walt Liebscher; *Bones*, Donald A. Wollheim; *The Ghostly Rental*, Henry James.

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#6, November 1964: *Caverns of Horror*, Laurence Manning; *Prodigy*, Walt Liebscher; *The Mask*, Robert W. Chambers; *The Life-After-Death of Mr. Thaddeus Warde*, Robert Barbour Johnson; *The Feminine Fraction*, David Grinnell; *Dr. Heidegger's Experiment*, Nathaniel Hawthorne; *The Pacer*, August Derleth; *The Moth*, H. G. Wells; *The Door to Saturn*, Clark Ashton Smith.

#7, January 1965: *The Thing From—Outside*, George Allan England; *Black Thing at Midnight*, Joseph Payne Brennan; *The Shadows on the Wall*, Mary Wilkins-Freeman; *The Phantom Farmhouse*, Seabury Quinn; *The Oblong Box*, Edgar Allan Poe; *A Way With Kids*, Ed M. Clinton; *The Devil of the Marsh*, E. B. Marriott-Watson; *The Shuttered Room*, H. P. Lovecraft & August Derleth.

#8, April 1965: *The Black Laugh*, William J. Makin; *The Hand of Glory*, R. H. D. Barham; *The Garrison*, David Grinnell; *Passeur*, Robert W. Chambers; *The Lady of the Velvet Collar*, Washington Irving; *Jack*, Reynold Junker; *The Burglar-Proof Vault*, Oliver Taylor; *The Dead Who Walk*, Ray Cummings.

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Coming Next Issue

A CRY FROM BEYOND

by Victor Rousseau

to see their opinions in print, but all sort of comment) and we would have no way of knowing whether others agreed with you, or whether the feeling was turning in your direction.

David Charles Paskow, who missed the letter section in our Fall issue, but concurs with the desirability of omitting it under the circumstances, continues: "I must congratulate you for the high literary quality you maintain in all three of your fiction publications. It's been four years now for MOH (Happy Fourth Birthday!) and I'm hoping that you'll once more be in a position to offer subscriptions . . . Here's to many more years of MOH!"

Subscriptions are now available. It is not necessary to cut out a coupon—that is just there for convenience if you want to use it. So long as your name and address is printed clearly (or typed if possible), the issue with which you want the subscription to start is stated, and your check is good, no official form is required.

Gene D'Orsogna writes from Stony Brook, New York: "The current issue of MOH (Fall, #17) was, to my mind, an average issue, the high spot being *The Curse of Amen-Ra*. When I first noticed the length of this piece, I said to myself (not really said to myself, but let us not delve into psychiatrics) 'I certainly hope I enjoy it.' If I had not liked the novella, half the issue would have been for naught. Herein lies the problem of publishing lengthy material in a magazine that appears as infrequently as MOH. If a reader

does not care for the piece, the issue, in essence, has been wasted for him. Ah, well, I liked it, anyway. I must confess, however, that upon seeing the title on the cover of MOH, I envisioned a yarn akin to the old Boris Karloff flicks dealing with killer mummies and deranged Egyptian priests. I was presently set on the right path, however. I wager when the final *Reckoning* is tabulated, that *The Curse of Amen-Ra* will emerge victorious. It certainly should have no competition from the likes of *A Sense of Crawling*.

Never have I read such an inept piece of short fiction in my life. The characters drawn out of *WHIZ COMICS* or something similar. The writing out of *JACK' AND JILL* magazine. The plot shamefully cribbed from Carl Stephenson's powerful and, I feel, immortal *Leininger Versus the Ants*. I personally would rather have seen *It Is Written . . .* in its usual spot than this waste of time, paper, and words.

"The cover of the current issue was very effective, one of the best to date. I would like to see, however, your cover illustrations depict a scene from one of the stories in the issue . . .

"I was wondering: Have you decided against reprinting the Lovecraft-Derleth novel, *The Lurker at the Threshold*? I hope you haven't. I would like very much to see it in MOH."

I have a strong suspicion that my feelings, upon seeing *The Curse of Amen-Ra*, were the same as yours; and that may be the reason why I never got around to reading it back in 1932.

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#9, June 1965: *The Night Wire*, H. F. Arnold; *Sacrilege*, Wallace West; *All the Stain of Long Delight*, Jerome Clark; *Skulls in the Stars*, Robert E. Howard; *The Photographs*, Richard Marsh; *The Distortion out of Space*, Francis Flagg; *Guarantee Period*, William M. Danner; *The Door in the Wall*, H. G. Wells; *The Three Low Masses*, Alphonse Daudet; *The Whistling Room*, William Hope Hodgson.

#10, August 1965: *The Girl at Heddon's*, Pauline Kappel Prilucik; *The Torture of Hope*, Villiers de L'Isle-Adam; *The Cloth of Madness*, Seabury Quinn; *The Tree*, Gerald W. Page; *In the Court of the Dragon*, Robert W. Chambers; *Placide's Wife*, Kirk Mashburn; *Come Closer*, Joanna Russ; *The Plague of the Living Dead*, A. Hyatt Verrill.

#11, November 1965: *The Empty Zoo*, Edward D. Hoch; *A Psychological Shipwreck*, Ambrose Bierce; *The Call of the Mech-Men*, Laurence Manning; *Was It a Dream?*, Guy de Maupassant; *Under the Hau Tree*, Katherine Yates; *The Head of Du Bois*, Dorothy Norman Cooke; *The Dweller in Dark Valley*, (verse) Robert E. Howard; *The Devil's Pool*, Grege la Spina.

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See page 128

Have You Missed These Issues?

#12, Winter 1965/66: *The Faceless God*, Robert Bloch; *Master Nicholas*, Seabury Quinn; *But Not the Herald*, Roger Zelazny; *Dr. Muncing, Exorcist*, Gordon MacCreagh; *The Affair at 7 Rue de M.*, John Steinbeck; *The Man in the Dark*, Irwin Ross; *The Abyss*, Robert A. W. Lowndes; *Denstination* (verse), Robert E. Howard; *Memories of HPL*, Muriel E. Eddy; *The Black Beast*, Henry S. Whitehead.

#13, Summer 1966: *The Thing in the House*, H. F. Scotten; *Divine Madness*, Roger Zelazny; *Valley of the Lost*, Robert E. Howard; *Hereditry*, David H. Keller; *Dwelling of the Righteous*, Anna Hunger; *Almost Immortal*, Austin Hall.

#14, Winter 1966/67: *The Lair of Star-Spawn*, Derleth & Scherer; *The Vacant Lot*, Mary Wilkins-Freeman; *Proof*, S. Fowler Wright; *Comes Now The Power*, Roger Zelazny; *The Moth Message*, Laurence Manning; *The Friendly Demon*, Daniel DeFoe; *Dark Hollow*, Emil Petaja; *An Inhabitant of Carcosa*, Ambrose Bierce; *The Monster-God of Mamurth*, Edmond Hamilton.

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Coming Next Issue

THE SIREN OF THE SNAKES

by Arlton Eadie

No, I haven't not positively decided against reprinting *The Lurker at the Threshold*; it was the shift to irregular and then to quarterly publication which made it necessary to suspend consideration of using anything which could not appear complete in one issue, and leave room for other stories as well. I have heard, though, that Arkham House is considering a reprint of the novel; and if this is the case, then there is little point in running it here.

J. J. Martin writes from Philadelphia: "I am writing to express my heartiest congratulations and appreciation for the very fine story, *The Curse of Amen-Ra* in the Fall #17 issue. It is much more enjoyable to me as I am an amateur Egyptologist and a great deal of the story read like a history book. It is thrilling and chilling as well. Keep up this type of story. Also *The Laughing Duke*."

Carrington B. Dixon, who found the Whitehead story "*Williamson*" best in the Fall issue, found the Rousseau novella "good but not exceptional" and the Alter "not a bad story", has a comment on Sam Moskowitz's introduction to *The Spell of the Sword*:

"... It is typical of Moskowitz that in his introduction he mentions several famous charmed swords of legend and past stories, but fails to note a contemporary series of stories featuring a charmed—and evil—sword. I am referring to Moorcock's 'Elric' stories. I consider *Stormbringer* from those stories a far more frightening weapon than the nameless sword of Aubrey's story. All (or almost all) the famous swords of

legends have had names. (Moskowitz mentions the names of two such weapons in the introduction but does not call attention to the fact.) It was a good idea in the days when all fiction (and most history) was handed down by word of mouth, for giving an object a 'personal' name makes it more memorable, for one now has the name to hang to. How many people would remember *Excalibur* if it were simply a sword in a stone?

"I wish I had my copy of *L'Morte D'Arthur* where I could reach it. After I wrote that last sentence, I remembered that Arthur did not draw *Excalibur* from the stone; it was another sword. *Excalibur* was given to him by the Lady of the Lake. (Remember, when he is dying he orders it thrown back into the lake, and when it is finally thrown, a hand comes out of the lake to catch it.)

"The sword in the stone has no name that I can remember seeing, which proves my point. How many people (like Moskowitz) would confuse it with *Excalibur* if it, too, had a name?"

Emil Petaja writes to tell us about a project which is of interest to lovers of fantastic and weird art:

**BOKANALIA FOUNDATION—
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Bokanalia Foundation is a small but fierce organization dedicated to the fulfilment of the Astrological Prophecy of Hannes Bok. Shortly before he died in April 1964, Bok wrote: "My recognition star burns low now, alas, but it is destined to rise high and bright by 1970."

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lia deplore the fact of his wonderful creations mouldering in a few dwindling collections of disintegrating yellow pulp magazines. More, we deplore that his greatest masterpieces, his unpublished color oils, remain hidden in private collections, perhaps to be destroyed by indifference and dog-in-the-mangerism. How about locating and making prints of these available to his old admirers and new ones? We have lost Hannes Bok, but shall not some of us make an effort to save his lifetime of work and his rare gifts from oblivion?

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thing about it! Also because our printer is a dedicated Hannes Bok fan and works for practically nothing. Also because Emil Petaja, Chairman, has offered his collection of 30 original Hannes Bok drawings and oils (including *Ase: Mother of Peer Gynt*, one of his greatest) toward this purpose. He hopes (as do other close friends of Bok) for some manner of Hannes Bok Museum, or room, where his originals can be preserved. He has offered to will his collection to such a Museum, if properly run. Petaja says, "I had the joy and honor to know Hannes Bok from his teens in 1936 until his death. We shared digs, corresponded constantly. I visited him often in N.Y. I reproduced his first drawings ever reproduced in a mimeo volume of poetry in 1937. I had his permission and support in putting out a Bok Folio in 1949. (See *WEIRD TALES* ads for *Fantasy Photos*.) I still have the photo material he gave me for this purpose."

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Well, we only have to wait three years now to see if Hannes' astrologically-derived prediction is accurate. Meanwhile, those who wish to take

part in making it come true (for it can only do so through the free-will co-operation of those who want to make it come true) are offered an opportunity through the Bokanalia Foundation—at the very least, a start.

In our last issue, we promised Pat Madden that we would investigate his feeling that not all of the material by H.P. Lovecraft that appeared in *Beyond the Wall of Sleep* has as yet been restored to print by Arkham House.

This is true only of certain articles, verses, and tales written in collaboration with other authors. (In fact, one collaboration—*In the Walls of Eryx*, with Kenneth Sterling—is included in *Dagon, and other Macabre Tales*.) Bits of juvenilia are available in the various "marginal" Lovecraft volumes that Arkham House has in print; and, of course, there are the numerous stories that Mr. Derleth himself has worked up from HPL's notes, fragments, letters, etc.

But all the "pure HPL" tales of his maturity are available in the three volumes now in print: the one noted above and *The Dunwich Horror and Others*, and *At the Mountains of Madness and Other Novels*. As noted elsewhere, it is my impression that the best of the collaborations will be restored to print in a later collection issued by Arkham House.

It is because Lovecraft's stories are now all available in fine editions that we have not run more of them in *MOH*, saving the space for unavailable stories by other authors—stories which you, the active readers, have requested. RAWL

The Editor's Page

(Continued from page 4)

sponses, to stifle thought rather than encourage it. But such bad writing has been present in every age (even if the 20th century captive audience is something of a new horror), so that every talented writer has had to extricate himself from outworn metaphors, clichés, etc. (Once upon a time "gray dawn" was fresh, vivid, either as an observation—some dawns *are* gray—or a symbol of oppressiveness in the soul.)

And the bad writers have chosen to perpetuate stale images for the sake of effective propaganda amongst the unthinking, or to achieve easy "thrills" amongst the same; but some of these bad writers have done this knowingly, while many others were just too lazy to make the effort at freshness.

I should say that particularly in the realm of imaginative fiction, this unimaginative product has been the result of laziness and insensitivity.

Elsewhere in this issue, I have commented upon the new Arkham House collection, *Travellers at Night*. I have found some faults, but really bad writing has not been a prominent one—though one fault I found with two of the stories was, in effect, the mechanical use of conventional gestures in this medium. But there is one story that everyone who wants

to write for *MAGAZINE OF HORROR*, etc., ought to read: *The Cellars*, by J. Ramsey Campbell.

Read it for its richness of imagery; how many of these metaphors and images have you seen before? ". . . he left her reluctantly, detaching himself from her presence as from a fly-paper . . ." "The snow, having flaked all color from the sky . . ." "The drenching gusts raised goose-pimples on the cars . . ." "Above them the rain tapped for admission." I am not concerned whether these and the many others you find in this tale are really good images and metaphors; I am concerned that they are fresh. You will find clichés in the conversations at times; these are people who do not use language imaginatively and clichés and platitudes, so long as they are not overdone, belong here. They do not belong in the author's text, and it would be worth your while to go through the story carefully and write down each *fresh* image, etc., and each one which seemed stale and overworked on separate sheets of paper; then note not only the balance, but also where the conventional and where the fresh ones appear. What percentage of conventionality comes in the conversation of conventional people? What percentage of fresh-

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#15, Spring 1967: *The Room of Shadows*, Arthur J. Burks; *Lillies*, Robert A. W. Lowndes; *The Flaw*, J. Vernon Shea; *The Doom of London*, Robert Barr; *The Vale of Lost Women*, Robert E. Howard; *The Ghoul Gallery*, Hugh B. Cave.

#16, Summer 1967: *Night and Silence*, Maurice Level; *Lazarus*, Leonid Andreyeff; *Mr. Octbur*, Joseph Payne Brennan; *The Dog That Laughed*, Charles Willard Diffin; *Ah, Sweet Youth*, Pauline Kappel Prilucik; *The Man Who Never Was*, R. A. Lafferty; *The Leaden Ring*, S. Baring-Gould; *The Monster of the Prophecy*, Clark Ashton Smith.

#17, Fall 1967: *A Sense of Crawling*, Robert Edmond Alter; *The Laughing Duke*, Wallace West; *Dermod's Bane*, Robert E. Howard; *The Spell of the Sword*, Frank Aubry; *"Williamson"*, Henry S. Whitehead; *The Curse of Amen-Ra*, Victor Rousseau.

#18, November 1967: *In Amundsen's Tent*, John Martin Leahy; *Transient and Immortal*, Jim Haught; *Out of the Deep*, Robert E. Howard; *The Bibliophile*, Thomas Boyd; *The Ultimate Creature*, R. A. Lafferty; *Wolves of Darkness*, Jack Williamson.

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Coming Next Issue
ONLY GONE BEFORE
by Emil Petaja

ness comes from the author's own descriptions, etc.? One reason why I find J. Ramsey Campbell worth reading, whether a particular story is the most original or not, is that he *makes the effort* to be fresh and individual in his writing—but the results do not look for a moment as if he were straining for effects. It is the sort of art which conceals art; one must have talent to begin with, but hard work must be added to that talent.

We see many stories where the author imagines he has evaded all necessity to use imagination in language by telling his story from the viewpoint of a person who thinks in clichés, is dull-witted, etc. Some literary masters have done this, true; but the point is that they knew when to do it, and when not to do it; and they didn't do it for the purpose of avoiding hard work. In any event, whatever value this sort of presentation may have had at any time has long since been exhausted.

Too many young persons who want to become writers, who very probably are honest in their belief that the story they sent in to me, and which I sent right back to them, was at least as good as some of the stories they've seen in MOH, don't want to make the effort; they are not willing to work; to study; to serve their apprenticeship.

Everyone who can write does not necessarily have Mr. Campbell's flair for images; nor is this necessary. But everyone who wants to write can, with effort and hard work, avoid giving us more maggoty manna. (If that phrase is obscure to you it would do you no harm to look up "manna" in Exodus.) RAWL

TALES OF WONDER – OLD AND NEW!

#1, Winter 1966/67: *The Girl in the Golden Atom*, Ray Cummings; *The City of Singing Flame*, Clark Ashton Smith; *Voice of Atlantis*, Laurence Manning; *The Plague*, George H. Smith; *The Question*, J. Hunter Holly.

#2, Spring 1967: *The Moon Menace*, Edmond Hamilton; *Dust*, Wallace West; *The White City*, David H. Keller, M.D.; *Rimghost*, A. Bertram Chandler; *Seeds From Space*, Laurence Manning.

#3, Summer 1967: *Beyond the Singing Flame*, Clark Ashton Smith; *Disowned*, Victor Enders-Smith; *A Single Rose*, Jon DeCles; *The Last American*, J. A. Mitchell; *The Man Who Awoke*, Laurence Manning.



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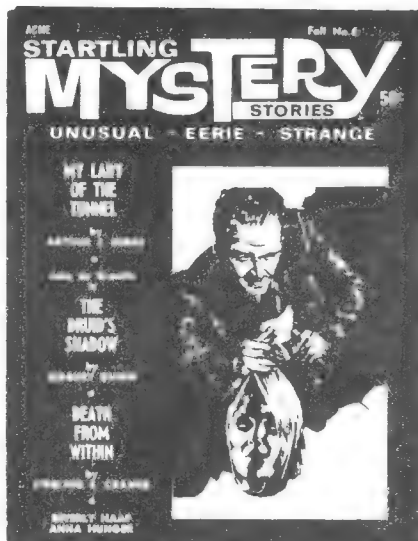
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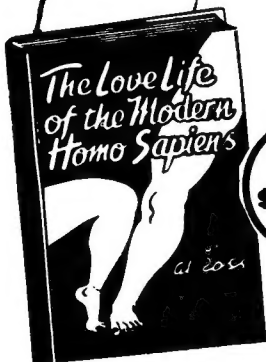
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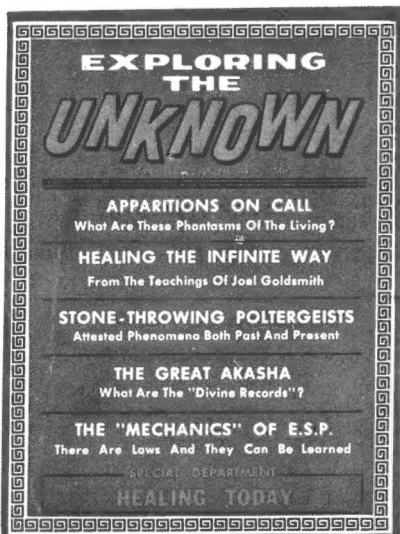
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